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**THEOSOPHY AND  
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT**



# THEOSOPHY AND CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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**TO**  
**THE MEMORY OF**  
**MY FATHER**



## PREFACE

THE aim of this book is to give, in non-technical language, a brief exposition of the main doctrines of Theosophy. An attempt is made to trace its historical origins and growth, to show its debt to certain philosophical systems, both eastern and western, and, in particular, to set forth the relations between theosophy and Christianity both in the early Christian centuries and at the present time.

In the preparation of the book I have had specially in view the growing number of those who, sharing in the general unsettlement of the times and revolting from what they understand to be the essentially dogmatic and exclusive attitude of Christianity, have felt powerfully the allurements of theosophy with all its supernaturalism and mystery and its promises of special illumination. In many cases those who have come under the spell of theosophy seem to have been attracted by its worse rather than by its better aspects, and it may be



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possible to direct their thoughts to its higher values. I hope that the definite adherents of the various theosophical groups will give me credit for a sincere effort to discover these higher values. At the same time I cannot help feeling that much of their most effective teaching is neither specifically theosophical nor exclusively modern. Those who are under the influence of a craving for novelty would do well to study the historical affiliations of their new-found creed, and they might then find that much in it which they took to be new, is really old with the age of centuries.

For those who are in revolt against the Christian tradition and environment the results of my investigations may be of service in showing that much of what is best in theosophy has really been borrowed from Christianity. Frequently the debt has been unacknowledged, and Christianity has been criticised for not containing the very truths which theosophy has borrowed. The direction of attention to these truths is all to the good under whatever designation they may be presented, and the particular label affixed would not matter in the least were it not that many have been led

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outside of Christianity in their quest for spiritual values which they would have found much more satisfactorily within Christianity itself. Those who have gone forth have done so unnecessarily: their self-imposed exile is the result of misinterpretation of their own religion. Had they had eyes to see they would have understood that while there is much—very much—which is good in theosophy, there is little of the highest value which has not been directly or indirectly derived from Christianity. The greatest service which theosophy can render to Christianity is that it should shake the complacency of the orthodox dogmatists and stimulate men everywhere to a rediscovery of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden within the Christian faith.

Residence in India gives peculiar opportunities for the study of the influence of theosophy in a non-Christian environment. Theosophy appeals especially to the people of India because it seems to have many close affinities to their ancient faiths and philosophies, and at the same time offers an adaptation of these which appears to be more suited to modern requirements. It might be of



## CHAPTER I

### The Scope and Significance of Theosophy

OPINIONS in regard to Theosophy seem to show that tendency towards extremes which is characteristic of our human judgments upon men and things. On the one hand, we have profound devotion to its teaching and almost awestruck veneration for its leaders. As we shall be largely concerned with such an attitude in the course of our analysis of theosophical teaching, it is unnecessary at this stage to consider it with any fulness. It is sufficient to point out that the very existence of such an attitude suggests the advisability of caution in investigation, criticism and acceptance.

On the other hand, we become aware of the extreme of inveterate suspicion and sneering contempt, manifested in the attitude of the dogmatist who is determined to secure the victory of his own particular view of truth and can brook no rival. In his intolerance he

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forgets that it is a mistake to meet any unwelcome or adverse belief, however alien it may be to a cherished faith, with either anger or scorn, and he fails to realise that even a superior attitude is altogether inappropriate if it is associated with ignorance of that which we condemn. It would be safer for such a dogmatist patiently to increase his knowledge lest he give himself over to the Philistines or confuse friends with enemies. In any case, it is unsafe to argue that, because excessive sympathy has often been the ally of superstition, sympathy in all its degrees should be excluded.

Uncompromising opposition may, however, be due simply to the conservative tendencies of human nature. We are not all like the Athenians, spending our time in telling or hearing of some new thing. Rather do we illustrate the truth of Goethe's remark to Eckermann that "if any one advance anything new, people resist with all their might; they act as if they neither heard nor could comprehend; they speak of the new view with contempt as if it were not worth the trouble of even so much as investigation or of regard." But developments of thought and life which are disregarded are

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apt to avenge themselves. Indifference may prevent new truths from being discovered and provide a concealment for ancient enemies.<sup>1</sup> At the present time, however, the general attitude to theosophy is one midway between blind adherence and open opposition. It is reminiscent of the opinion of Kant, the philosopher, regarding ghost stories. He declared that, while he doubted every one of them, he had a certain faith in all of them put together. Many critics of theosophy are in an exactly similar position. They may be able to point out flaws in particular arguments, and congratulate themselves correspondingly upon their cleverness, but they have at the same time a vague and slightly uncomfortable feeling that "there is something in it after all." Such a position cannot be permanently occupied either by the opponents or the friends of theosophy. If theosophy deserves to be opposed,

<sup>1</sup> We may compare the attitude described in the recent Lambeth Encyclical: "The tendency to say that the old is good is particularly strong in the Church. Religious people are apt to feel the goodness of the old so much that they are slow to prove whether there are yet powers of God on which they have never drawn. They are almost equally slow to believe that they might themselves receive the blessing which was given to faith in its primitive freshness. As a result of this, sometimes men and women form fellowships that they may do outside the Church what they ought to have had opportunity to do, and to do better, within it."

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vagueness of thinking may generate a smoke-screen which hinders the pressing home of the attack; whereas if theosophy deserves to be defended, this same vagueness may prevent the transformation of blind devotion into intelligent appreciation. Generalities provide opportunities for elusive enemies and secure only insubstantial friends. The exiguous statement that "there is something in it," must be examined so that we may give an answer as to *what* is in it, or not in it.

The number of those who proceed to more definite adherence to theosophy is certainly not diminishing. In the year 1888 Madame Blavatsky could write sadly: "It is barely possible that the minds of the present generation are not quite ripe for the reception of occult truth."<sup>1</sup> At the same time she hazarded a prophecy that the twentieth century would see a great increase in the popularity of her teaching, and the prophecy seems likely to be fulfilled.

There are now branches of the Theosophical Society in almost every country in the world. The number of lodges is 1,100, the membership

<sup>1</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 298.

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about 30,000, and the influence of theosophical teaching is even greater than these considerable numbers might lead us to imagine. It has been said by a recent writer that "it is impossible adequately to estimate the true significance of theosophy without considering its position and significance in India,"<sup>1</sup> and it is undoubtedly true that India is the country most affected by theosophical influences. America, however, is a good second, and in the latter country the percentage is greater. Moreover, the figures upon which comparison between the two countries is based, represent only the Society owning allegiance to Mrs. Besant. But besides this, there is in America a Society, with a considerable membership, calling itself the Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society, and claiming to be the original Theosophical Society. Despite the "Universal Brotherhood" idea expressed in the title of one of them, there is no love lost between the societies. Perhaps when a mother and daughter cannot agree as to which is mother and which is daughter, harmony is a little too much to expect; and there are other societies

<sup>1</sup> McNeile, *From Theosophy to Christian Faith*, p. 40.



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in existence in which the practice of the members does not correspond with the meaning of the title under which they group themselves.

In Britain the explicit progress of theosophy has not been so rapid as in America and India, but its affinities—though not by any means its complete agreement—with spiritualism and with some of the main doctrines of Christian Science, are obtaining for it a more and more favourable reception. It is welcomed by many as ministering to those yearnings of the spirit which are the outcome of a distaste for definite statement of doctrine, of a dim recognition that Christianity especially is much more than dogma. It meets the needs of those who are caught in the swing of the reaction against materialistic conceptions and who distinguish but poorly between the spiritual and spiritualism. It seems to offer a solace to those whose love of the mysterious has been deepened through the general unsettlement of life and thought brought about by the devastating events of the last few years. Speculations about the unseen world are often regarded as a relief from the confusions of the more immediate environment.

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The modern history of theosophy may be said to date from the year 1875, when in the words of Mrs. Besant, "theosophy again rode into the arena of the world's thought, mounted on its new steed, the Theosophical Society," under the guidance of the lady who is referred to as "the modern Ariadne—the much misunderstood and much maligned Helena Petrovna Blavatsky."<sup>1</sup> Madame Blavatsky, who is familiarly, though reverently, known by her followers as H.P.B., was a woman with a varied history. She was born in 1831, and from her early days took a great interest in spiritualism, frequently acting as a medium. In 1873 she went to America, and in 1875, as spiritualism by itself was not flourishing, she, in conjunction with Col. Olcott, founded the Theosophical Society. Her aim, as she herself stated it in a letter to a friend in Russia, was "to make an experimental comparison between spiritualism and the magic of the ancients by following literally the instructions of the old Cabbalas, both Jewish, and Egyptian." As things in America did not prove altogether to their liking, the two leaders, frequently known

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Theosophy*, p. 16.

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as the "Theosophical Twins," migrated to India in 1878, and here fortune favoured them to a greater extent. Madame Blavatsky, whose historical interests had previously been directed chiefly towards Egypt, was acute enough to perceive that other religions also might yield abundant material for the elucidation and development of her doctrines. She made a direct appeal to India's justifiable pride in a rich philosophical and religious inheritance, and thus evoked the patriotic sentiments of the people of the land which one of her school has described as "the fountain-head of the highest, if the least known and the most secluded culture of the world"<sup>1</sup>. She gathered round her a circle of devoted admirers, both Indian and European, who were thorough believers in her as a person of vast learning, possessing marvellous occult powers. Her claims were supported by the citation of many wonderful phenomena for which she was said to have been responsible, such as the discovery of lost articles and the transportation of heavy bodies over great distances. And it was said also that behind her was the influence

<sup>1</sup> Sinnett, *Occult World*, p. 35.

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of the Great White Brotherhood in Thibet—a lodge of Masters and Adepts who were willing to admit certain suitable candidates as pupils. Madame Blavatsky claimed to be in particular communication with a Master who bore the name of Koot Hoomi, and, after the headquarters of the Society were removed in 1882 to Adyar in Madras, a regular system of communications was opened up with this Master. Letters used to be posted in a shrine in Madame Blavatsky's house in Madras, and it was alleged that the next day answers were regularly found there, purporting to come from Koot Hoomi. It is not said where the answers were posted, and the evidence for their genuineness is very far from being satisfactory. An enquiry conducted under the auspices of the Society for Psychical Research led to the conclusion that the whole theory of communication from an unseen Master was a piece of deception. It was found that the shrine in question had been made with sliding panels at the back, and there seems, to be no doubt that the answers were introduced by means of a mechanical device of this kind. Madame Blavatsky left Madras in 1885, never to return. She lived for some six years

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longer, and during this time she produced her most important work, the *Secret Doctrine*, a voluminous and authoritative compendium of theosophic doctrines. Shortly after her death a schism took place in the Society. For reasons upon which it is not necessary here to enter, Mr. W. Q. Judge, one of the Blavatsky group, separated from the main Theosophical Society, and founded the "Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society," having its headquarters in California. The main tradition in India was carried on by Col. Ollcott and Mrs. Besant (who had spent most of her time there since 1893), and since the death of the former, in 1907, Mrs. Besant has been the President of the Theosophical Society.

In Mrs. Besant the Society has had a leader of a much higher type than its original founder. However much disagreement there may be with many of her doctrines, her great personal ability cannot be denied, and she has lent her support to many much-needed schemes of reform. Her literary output has been enormous, and her authority within theosophical circles has been practically unquestioned. One of her school describes her

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and another as "the perennial sources of theosophical learning."<sup>1</sup> There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of her devotion to truth, though her self-consciousness and the restriction of her catholicity may occasionally be regretted. An address which she delivered at the anniversary meeting of the Theosophical Society in 1915 shows a characteristic mixture of qualities: "Trust in truth who never betrays her servant. The determination to think your highest, the determination to think your best, may lead you into a desert for a time; but there are gardens on the other side of the desert. . . . I who ventured all for truth, who left family, friends, religion, because their religion had become to me untrue, I bear you witness that such unbelief is the way to a higher, a greater, a serener faith, and that those who are unwilling to lose the life of the past, will not be able to advance into the life of the future."<sup>2</sup>

In India, however, we have to reckon not only with outstanding personalities and with definite numbers, but with a very

<sup>1</sup> Wedgewood, *Varieties of Psychism*, p. XI.

<sup>2</sup> *Theosophy and Life's Deeper Problems*, p. 6.

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considerable spread of subtle and implicit influence. Such an influence is largely exercised by means of literature, which, even when not directly theosophical, is yet in agreement with its main tendency. The output from the publications office in Adyar is very extensive, and, though quality may not always be equal to quantity, even quantity is not without important effect upon the public mind. Theosophical literature is often to be found in the hands of thinking men who would disclaim any overt connection with the society, and its popularity with all classes of students is great. It may occasionally be doubtful whether the causes of this popularity are always purely theosophical.

As regards the definition and significance of theosophy, we gain a certain amount of guidance from the derivation of the term. It means the "wisdom" or the "knowledge of God"; and the question at once arises as to how theosophical knowledge is to be distinguished from the knowledge with which all religion—or, at least, all philosophy of religion—is concerned. If it is the aim of all religious search to obtain a knowledge of God, what

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*special* claim does theosophy make? In some of their moods its upholders would make no special claim at all. They would maintain that theosophy is nothing new, but simply an expression of the knowledge which is contained in all religion. But if the word "theosophy" indicates merely the intellectual aspect of the religious consciousness in general, why, we may ask, should we use a special term? We do not make a special group of those who breathe the common air of the atmosphere; why should we accord special treatment to those who in the religious sphere breathe the common air of religious truth? It soon, however, becomes apparent that "theosophy" is intended to indicate a kind of knowledge which is more or less intuitive—a *direct* knowledge of God. It is a knowledge comparable in some respects to that obtained in mystical vision, but contains a larger proportion of ostensibly intellectual elements. Moreover, the mystic's knowledge is to a greater extent the result of immediate contact between himself and God, whereas the theosophist has to confess to a considerable amount of dependence on authority. The truth is communicated to



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him through the medium of a teacher, and this teacher is but the channel of communication with those who are greater than he is—representatives of the lodge of the Great White Brotherhood, dwelling mysteriously in the mountainous regions of Thibet, custodians of a sacred tradition which is at the basis of all religions. The body of truth enshrined in the sacred tradition has, at times when it was in danger of being corrupted by the crude notions of the crowd, frequently been withdrawn from the possession of all but a few chosen spirits. But, though concealed, this truth has never been destroyed, and it may now be re-discovered in a measure by the theosophic aspirant, provided he puts himself under the guidance of a proper teacher and adopts the requisite methods for the cultivation of his faculties of spiritual apprehension. This idea of a mysterious body of doctrine, almost as mysteriously communicated, is always one of the main constituents of theosophical theory, though it is of course admitted that the complete knowledge open to the theosophical searcher may also include results obtained in a more commonplace manner. For the most part,

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however, the aspirant is not expected to follow the modern scientific method of reasoning from particulars to generals, or to base his assertions on his own experience. He accepts the greater part of his information on the authority of a teacher. As Mr. A. P. Sinnett puts it ; "Teaching *per se* is never anything else but teaching on authority."<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Besant, however, is careful not to assign this authority too indiscriminately. She warns us, *e.g.*, that "the opinions of the President of the Society have no more authority within that body than the opinions of the lowliest member who is a fellow of the Theosophical Society."<sup>2</sup> Mr. Leadbeater is also comparatively modest in his references to authority. He suggests that the mystical teaching need not be accepted as more than a hypothesis.<sup>3</sup> Still it seems to be commonly held amongst theosophists that proof, when it is adduced at all, must come in only at a later stage. A proof similar to verification of a hypothesis is preferred to patient

<sup>1</sup> *Esoteric Buddhism*, p. 19. (Cf. also, Miss Edger's reference to the transmigration theory as based on the authority of "ancient teachers," *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 58.)

<sup>2</sup> *Theosophy and the Theosophical Society*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Textbook of Theosophy*, p. 11.

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building up from experience, and we are not sure that it is always sufficiently kept in mind that the hypothesis is, after all, *only* a hypothesis. In any case the procedure followed lays greater stress on deduction than on induction.

Further, it is claimed that such knowledge as theosophy provides is universal in character. The authoritative teachers have preserved or have rediscovered the truths which are at the basis of all religion. Theosophy is nothing new. "In the Garden of the world it culls the fairest and the most fragrant flowers, planted by the great Teachers, . . ."<sup>1</sup> Or, as Madame Blavatsky puts it in the introduction to her most important book: "The teachings contained in these volumes belong neither to the Hindus, the Zoroastrians, the Chaldeans, nor the Egyptian religion, neither to Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, nor Christianity exclusively. The secret doctrine is the essence of all these. The aim of the work is . . . to rescue from degradation the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions; to recover to some extent the fundamental unity from which they all spring."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Theosophy*, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. viii.

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In all religions, perhaps most of all in Christianity, the fundamental truths have been covered over, and it is the business of theosophy to exhibit them once more in their purity and beauty. It will approach the adherent of any religion with an offer of spiritual help, so that he may complete the truth which, through the disingenuousness of priests and the obscurantism of the popular mind, has in the course of the centuries become but a half truth. When in connection with the different religions men have thus been helped to complete their partial truths, it will be found that contradictions have disappeared, and, when the broken arc becomes the perfect round, the completed circle of truth becomes the common possession of all humanity. It is claimed that theosophy is really the sum of all religions and helps each man to appreciate the worth of his own religion just in so far as he perceives its deepest truth to be an aspect of universal truth.

The counterpart of this attitude is an impressive catholicity and a freedom from intolerance and dogmatism which is at first sight most attractive. Theosophy has no creed and therefore is not compelled to fight in

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defence of its faith. As in practical life it urges a spirit of goodwill and brotherhood, so in the realm of the intellect and the spirit it is ready to welcome and respect the convictions of all. The most tender solicitude is expressed for the intellectual freedom of every searcher after truth. No attempt will be made to force a rigid doctrine upon him. Each one must be left to win the supreme knowledge for himself ; others can only point the way towards it or act as guides upon the upward path. In what might be described as a manifesto of the Theosophical Society, repeated in several of her books, Mrs. Besant says : “ No person’s religious opinions are asked upon his joining, nor is interference with them permitted, but every one is required to show to the religion of his fellow-members the same respect as he claims for his own. 3038 . The Society has no dogmas, and therefore, no heretics. It does not shut any man out because he does not believe in theosophical teaching. The Theosophical Society is composed of students, belonging to any religion in the world or to none. . . . Their bond of union is not the profession of a common belief, but a common

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search and aspiration for truth. . . . They extend tolerance to all, even to the intolerant, not as a privilege they bestow, but as a duty they perform ; and they seek to remove ignorance, not to punish it. They see every religion as a partial expression of the Divine Wisdom, and prefer its study to its condemnation, and its practice to proselytism.”<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>

Assuming, with perhaps not quite sufficient warrant, that every religion *can* be explained, theosophy aims at explaining to every man the religion to which he originally belonged. He is\*to be left in that religion. If he is a Hindu, he will remain a Hindu, if a Christian, a Christian, if a Buddhist, a Buddhist. By the aid of theosophy he will in fact be more securely entrenched in his ancestral religion, for theosophy will help him to discover its essential meaning and value. The principle of catholicity is laid down repeatedly and with

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy*, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> To this enlightened and liberal manifesto which, taken as a whole, shows greater independence of authority and dogmatism than many other theosophical writings, there is rather a striking parallel in the statement of the aims of the Society for Psychical Research, given by Mr. Andrew Lang in a recent Presidential Address : “ The Society as such has no views, no beliefs, no hypothesis, except perhaps the opinion that there is an open field for enquiry ; that not all the faculties and potentialities of man have been studied and explained up to date, in terms of nerve and brain.” (Quoted in Barrett, *Psychical Research*, p. 247.)

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emphasis, and from the theosophical point of view the result is that a man may hold any creed he pleases. We cannot, however, avoid the suspicion that theosophy would impose one limitation—*the creed must not be held too firmly*. If a man grasps his creed firmly, it is thought that he will inevitably become narrow-minded and exclusive, and, in the intensity of his devotion to his own religion, will be apt to deny or despise the truth of others. The possibility of intense devotion being inclusive of the good that is in other religions is not sufficiently considered by theosophists. Rather than run the risk of narrowness, they hold that it is better to have no creed and to sit loose to every form of faith, or at least to allow the outlines of belief to become so indefinite that, even if one's own creed contain elements contradictory to the creed of others, these contradictions will not be uncomfortably apparent. In the dimness of theosophic catholicity it will thus be comparatively easy to assert that all the creeds are but aspects of one universal body of truth.

The revolt against rigid dogma which this attitude implies, deserves the fullest sympathy and approval, and it is just here that one of the

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chief sources of the popularity of theosophy may be discovered. But at the same time the attitude seems to reveal a slightly insecure grasp of the principle of contradiction. Disregard of this principle may indeed be deliberate, as in the case of Prof. Lossky of Petrograd, who in his recent work explicitly argues that the principle cannot be applied when we reach the higher or intuitive levels of thought.<sup>1</sup> But it is to be feared that in the theosophic attitude we have an example, not of explicit rejection of the principle, but of unenergetic indifference to it. Wherever contradictions appear, there are always three methods of dealing with them : the contradictions may be softened and blurred ; or, one of the two contradictory assertions may be selected and the other rejected ; or, finally, one may be discovered to be more comprehensive than the other and to include whatever of truth there may have been in that other. Theosophy confines itself to the first two alternatives, and naturally chooses the former of them because it regards the second as savouring of narrowness and bigotry and therefore undesirable. But surely the third alternative

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Intuitive Basis of Knowledge*, p. 279.



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is also a possibility open to all seekers after religious truth. We cannot reduce the religions to a featureless identity, nor can we hope to resolve all the contradictions amongst them. There is a gradation in the presentations of the religious truth, and it is the duty of every earnest inquirer to prefer the higher to the lower, taking as his test of the higher its greater consistency and comprehensiveness. Loyal adherence to a higher religion does not mean complete rejection of the lower. It means that we gather up and accept in a higher religion, implicitly or explicitly, the truth which the lower contains. In order to escape the charge of dogmatism it is not necessary that we should reject all creeds, but only that, having searched for and found the most comprehensive creed of all, we should hold it with openness of mind and should beware of assuming too readily that we are able to determine for all time the exact limits of its comprehensiveness. There is a higher and a lower catholicity, the former being based on comprehensiveness and the latter upon vagueness, and theosophy seems sometimes to have been too easily satisfied with the lower.

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It is probably just because the theosophical ideal of catholicity is not the highest that many writers of this school find considerable difficulty in maintaining it. The human mind cannot be permanently satisfied with vagueness, and we find that in order to escape from vagueness theosophists depart occasionally from their own emphasis upon universality. We have seen that one of their claims is that they help the adherents of any religion to discover the deeper excellences of their own faith, to lay bare once more the foundations which have been concealed by flimsy superstructures of ceremonial superstition, and erect thereupon a more secure building which shall be a temple of worship for all humanity. But theosophy retains the right to say how much reconstruction is necessary, and in the enforcement of this right exercises very considerable and arbitrary powers of selection. Thus Christianity is "reconstructed" to such an extent that in many of its aspects even its most intelligent and liberal-minded adherents would fail to recognise it, whereas a much slighter transformation is for the most part considered to be all that is necessary in connection with

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**Hinduism.** The principle of universal acceptance is thus departed from in favour of those truths which are in closest agreement with the body of doctrines which theosophy implicitly accepts even while nominally rejecting all creeds.

Further, in regard to the truths which are accepted, a somewhat peculiar procedure is adopted. We occasionally find a tendency not only to derive, but to *deduct* or substract, these truths from other religions. The origin of the truths is forgotten, temporarily or permanently. They are regarded as having passed into the possession of theosophy, and other religions are criticised because of the absence from them of those very truths which theosophy has borrowed from them. It may be asked whether we do not find here one of the reasons for the attractiveness of theosophy. Mrs. Besant, e.g., seems to have been familiar in her earlier years with an extremely rigid and orthodox form of Christianity, and she is at times inclined to set this forth as the *whole* of Christianity. Other teachings of a more refined and persuasive character, such as the immanental character of God and the brotherhood of humanity, are represented as primarily

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theosophical. Thus adherents are attracted to theosophy through the prospect of obtaining what they could quite well have obtained from their own faith if they had properly understood it. Whilst one would gladly welcome under any name emphasis upon such teachings, the procedure by which this emphasis is allowed to bring credit to theosophy only, appears to be slightly disingenuous and also illiberal.

If we examine the truths which theosophy claims to have discovered or re-discovered, we shall find another limitation of catholicity. Theosophy has really a wider and a narrower meaning. In its wider aspect it includes the truths which are fundamental in most religions, if not in all, and of which the validity may be tested by their universality. But associated with these universal truths, there are other doctrines of a more special character, many of them of exclusively Indian origin and many of them based upon the possession of occult powers of penetration into the secrets of nature. These latter greatly benefit by their associates. The prestige which the more general truths acquire because of their universality, is transferred with excessive facility to the more

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peculiar doctrines. There is seldom frank consideration of the dilemma that what is universal is not specifically theosophical, and what is theosophical is not universal, and theosophy carries over the credit of universality to those teachings which can lay no just claim to anything like general acceptance.

It may indeed be doubted whether it is possible to support a claim to universality in association with the degree of deference to authority which is shown by theosophy. This matter will come up again for discussion in connection with the relation between theosophy and science, but in the meantime it will be sufficient to note that there is a certain antagonism between universality and deference to authority. Not that theosophists are agreed in their estimation of the importance of authority or uniform in their degree of deference. Mrs. Besant, e.g., in the manifesto from which we have already quoted, urges that "belief should be the result of individual study or intuition and not its antecedent, and should rest on knowledge, not on assertion,"<sup>1</sup> while on the other hand, Mr. Sinnett, as we have

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy*, p. 90.

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seen, is much more inclined to be dependent on authority.<sup>1</sup> But on the whole we find in theosophical writers a subtle deference to the authority of particular teachers which is hardly consistent with a claim to intellectual freedom and universality. A former adherent of the system speaks of the gradual loss of independence. By almost imperceptible degrees a surrender is made to the guidance of a special teacher and before long the influence is discovered to be dominant.

Such a teacher may profess to be a pupil of the theosophical adepts, and thus to bring with him the authority of venerable tradition as well as of membership in the great White Brotherhood. This attitude is exactly what might have been expected in connection especially with the more peculiar and occult doctrines, which cannot be regarded as the result of ordinary experience, but depend rather upon the higher faculties of occult penetration. When an aspirant meekly suggests that he does not possess these faculties and therefore is not aware of the wonderful facts upon which theosophists base so many

<sup>1</sup> See above, p. 27.

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of their conclusions, he will probably be immediately told that he can acquire these faculties by patience and perseverance in certain disciplines, and that in the meantime he had better follow the guidance of the Masters or Adepts—those who “know” independently of the laborious methods of reasoning suitable for lower intelligences. Thus theosophy, starting with a condemnation of dogmatism, seems to describe a full circle and come back to dogmatism again, and, whether or not the last state is worse than the first, it is at least difficult to adjust this dogmatism to the theosophical claim to universality. It is also doubtful whether the frequent assertion of theosophists that they have no creed, can be accepted without reservations.

What has been already said about the general significance of theosophy may be set in clearer light by a reference to the statement of their threefold aim which is usually given by theosophists. The three objects of their activity are said to be the following :

- (1) To form a nucleus of a universal brotherhood.

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- (2) To encourage the study of Comparative Religion.
- (3) To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.

In the course of our brief discussion of theosophical catholicity we have already had under consideration the second of these aims and its relation to the third. Further consideration of the third aim will occupy us in a later chapter. In general it may be said that much of the popularity of theosophy is due to a skilful combination of these three objects. The first two are universally acceptable, though not particularly theosophical, and the third, to which theosophy might lay more specific claim, lives on the reputation of the other two. In the meantime, as regards the first object, it may be said that theosophy has no right to affix to it its own particular label. Emphasis upon good-will and brotherhood is the outcome of every religion of higher worth, and is especially the result of a proper appreciation of Christianity. It might indeed be pointed out that the emphasis which Mrs. Besant rightly lays upon this ideal is due to the influence upon her



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of Christianity and is one of her unacknowledged debts to her ancestral religion. But, apart from this consideration, stress upon this ideal has been of great service to the cause of theosophy in India for the reason that in this way an easy transition is afforded from religious to political activity, and the popularity of the religious teaching is enhanced through association with a summons to political service. Racial difficulties have been exaggerated by showing how much they are at variance with this ideal, and the alleged unsympathetic actions of government have been exhibited for condemnation, the implication being that devotion to the theosophical ideal would remove all the hindrances to brotherhood. It is suggested that here we have an unmistakable illustration of the superiority of theosophy over Christianity, as if the appeal for brotherly love were a distinctive characteristic of the former as contrasted with the latter. It is implied that theosophy will give special encouragement to legitimate political aspirations, and it thus occasionally obtains from a political source an additional credit to which it could not lay claim as a religious system pure and

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simple. And yet it cannot be said that theosophy, as a religious system, has laid special stress upon brotherhood in any practical way; Mrs. Besant's activities in the direction of social reform are admirable, but they cannot be said to have been specially inspired by theosophy. Another authority on theosophy expressly disclaims any definite advice as to participation in practical affairs: "There is such diversity of opinion as to the best methods of improving social conditions that it would not be possible for the Society, as a society, to take up any special scheme: the prejudices and opinions of some of the members would inevitably be offended; and so the Society, by identifying itself with any one method, would practically shut out of its ranks those who disapproved of it."<sup>1</sup> This caution may be altogether expedient, but it rather weakens the claim of theosophy to a peculiar interest in the practical expression of human brotherhood.

<sup>1</sup>Edger, *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 18.

## CHAPTER II

### The Antecedents of Modern Theosophy

We have seen that theosophy emphasises the idea of a direct and intuitive knowledge of God, which may be cultivated in an atmosphere of human brotherhood and good-will, which becomes, indeed, a personal possession, but is yet dependent to a great extent on the guidance of authoritative teachers. This knowledge will be expressed in truths which are basic in every religion and universal in their significance, but with these truths will be associated doctrines of a more occult character, which are the outcome of the possession and cultivation of special and secret powers and result in an appreciation of the laws of nature and control of her hidden forces such as is not granted to the generality of mankind.

The constant reference which modern theosophy makes to the authority of the past

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renders necessary and important a study of its historical antecedents. Theosophy is the heir of a long tradition. It claims to gather up and reproduce in itself the ideas of romantic chivalry, pilgrimage quests, mediæval secret societies ; it stretches back the links of association to the most recondite philosophy of the successors of Plato ; it reveals—or, at least, claims the right to reveal—the mysteries of Greece, Egypt, and the Orient ; and it expounds again the hidden thoughts of the ancient sages of India. It is especially interested in the so-called heresies, which, with Hippolytus, it regards as but the old philosophies disguised under new names. It feels that its admiration for its own doctrines would not be worthily expressed unless it could show that they were more than merely mushroom growths. “A philosophy so profound,” says a leading theosophist, “a moral code so ennobling, and practical results so conclusive and so uniformly demonstrated, are not the growth of a generation or even of a single epoch.”<sup>1</sup>

In one aspect the theosophical attitude to the past of religious thought is part of the

<sup>1</sup> Sinnett, *Occult World*, p. 157.

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popular appeal to the scientific interest, as that interest is expressed intellectually in the definite study of Comparative Religion, and emotionally in the spirit of broad-minded tolerance. Theosophy has shown commendable energy in the collection of materials for the investigation of the differing modes of religious thought and has thus attempted a task to which the Christian Church has often been unduly reluctant to address herself. Yet, as we shall see more fully later, the attitude of theosophists to the past history of religion is slightly at variance with the genuine historical spirit. They seem inclined to go to history not so much to discover what has actually been the record of the development from the more primitive to the more advanced forms of theosophic doctrine, as to seize upon any suggestions whatsoever of the presence of a hidden knowledge which they have somewhat arbitrarily described. Wherever the point of view is dualistic, wherever there is belief in grades of being or in transmigration, wherever there is an exclusive, semi-sacerdotal caste, elaborating rites of initiation and laying claim to esoteric knowledge and mysterious power

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over nature, there the adjective "theosophical" may be, it is said, applied. It would seem that in any period, similarity of external conditions is held to indicate similarity in regard to the systems of thought evolved, as if resemblance of vessels might be taken to mean resemblance of contents. Theosophy is sometimes described as a torch by means of which we may explore the dim recesses of the past, but occasionally its flickering light suggests fantastic images which are hardly copies of realities. And in cases where there is an obvious discrepancy between fact and fancy, where historical documents do not support the theory advanced, there is a dangerous readiness to offer the explanation that the more important parts of the documents have been lost, or have been deliberately concealed by the Masters lest the profundity of their teaching might be abused. In such circumstances it is held to be desirable that the populace should be left only with a garbled version, sufficient to occupy their attention until such time as they may be fit to appreciate the truth in its fullness. The past is thus viewed through spectacles which suit the vision of contemporary

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leaders of theosophy, and the dignity of the present is supported by what it is imagined ought to have happened in the past rather than by the discovery of actual occurrences.<sup>1</sup>

It is undoubtedly true, however, that even when we give full weight to the cautions above indicated, the theosophists can offer considerable evidence for the existence of their teaching in past ages. Even as a "Society" they are not altogether a new creation, a "Theosophical Society" having been founded in London in the year 1767 by a mason of mystical tendencies. But a deeper continuity is searched for and not without a measure of success. Before she founded the Theosophical Society in 1875 Madame Blavatsky had been greatly interested in the magic of Egypt, and one of her chief aims had been to recover the occult knowledge possessed by the magicians of Egypt and other lands. It was not considered necessary to establish complete historical continuity, but still it was felt that the importance of theosophy

<sup>1</sup> The theory that the history of religious development illustrates the transmission of a hidden tradition is called by the theosophists "Comparative Religion," to distinguish it from the naturalistic theory which traces everything back to primitive and savage ancestral beliefs, and to which the theosophists would allow only the name of "Comparative Mythology."

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would be enormously increased if traces of its teaching could be found to have existed all down through the ages with only infrequent breaches of continuity. And the more varied the instances and the more unusual their associations with each other, the deeper would be the impression produced as to the magnitude of the tradition.

Definite associations such as those of the Knights Templar and the Free Masons,<sup>1</sup> the Rosicrucians and the Brethren of Light are regarded as holding theosophical doctrines, especially if they impose elaborate and mysterious rites of initiation and guard their secrets scrupulously from the uninitiated. Heretical groups, such as the Quietists, the Lollards, and the Albigenses, are also annexed theoretically as belonging to the theosophical tradition. In fact, wherever it is found that a sect has been persecuted or has incurred in any way the opposition of powerful church organisations, a reason for this harsh treatment is found in the possession by the sect of some of the secrets of theosophy. With comparative ease the moral

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Besant speaks of "the blessed movement of Masonry," *The Theosophical Outlook*, p. 110.



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is pointed that the Church as an organisation has been laying up retribution for itself and accumulating an evil *karma*. Just as France lost economically through the expulsion of the Huguenots, so, it is suggested, the Church has lost religiously through the repression of those who might have been her defence against the growing strength of materialism and scepticism. Tendencies of a popular and literary character, which are more diffused and difficult to define, are also placed to the credit of theosophy. In their mystic poems the Troubadours were the revealers of theosophic truth, and the quest of the Holy Grail, with all its literary aesthetic and religious associations, is but a symbol of theosophical unity, aspiration and achievement. "In this case," says Mrs. Cooper-Oakley, "the gracious message is vested, not as usual in religious forms, but veiled in the garb of chivalry, so that it may perhaps in this new presentation more easily touch the hearts of men and draw them to seek for the Kingdom Spiritual, the 'house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.'"<sup>1</sup> And whatever form the subtle influence may take,

<sup>1</sup> *Traces of a Hidden Tradition*, p. 138.

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it is possible, according to the theosophists, to find in connection with it illustrations of the indebtedness of the West to the more refined religious thought of the East.

So we are invited to ascend the stream of theosophical tradition and encouraged in the belief that, though it frequently flows underground, the current is always of considerable strength. In a short treatment such as this we must content ourselves with exploring chiefly the upper reaches of the stream. Theosophy of the present day finds that amongst the systems of thought of the early Christian centuries it is most completely anticipated by Neo-Platonism. Many theosophists boldly identify their teaching with this curious amalgam of philosophy and mysticism, of thought and emotionalism, of magic poetry and superstition, which had in it, perhaps, more of the name of Plato than of the substance of his doctrines. There is a curious similarity in many respects between the environment of modern theosophy in India and that of Neo-Platonism. We find the same mingling of philosophical penetration and popular superstition, the same welter and conflict of religions,

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the same reinvigorating interplay between the older forms of faith and the living forces of Christianity, the same desire to reconstruct the ancient religions, to substitute in some cases archæological for religious interest, and, by an extensive and almost excessive use of symbolism, to give expression to a somewhat sentimental catholicity.

Historically even, some of the secret societies of mediæval times might be linked up with Neo-Platonism. Iamblichus, one of the later members of the school, might not unjustifiably be claimed as the fore-runner of the Rosicrucians, and many of its most prominent leaders correspond, not so much to the type of philosopher as to the type of "initiate" or privileged possessor of a "secret doctrine." Ammonius Saccas, the master of Plotinus, is described as "*theodidaktos*," and this refers partly no doubt to the excellence of his teaching, but more particularly indicates that he was supposed to have been initiated into some kind of esoteric mysteries. Plotinus himself is dominated by the "backward look" and his attitude is that of receptivity to revelation rather than of active discovery of truth. As

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Mr. McKenna puts it in his edition of Plotinus, (p. 121), "his general assumption is that all his system is contained already in the most ancient knowledge of the world." For Plotinus, philosophy is not an active penetration into the secrets of metaphysical reality, but a state of the soul, especially of the soul of the "Uniate," whom he describes in a manner strangely anticipatory of the theosophical conception of the "Adept."

His teaching is based upon a dualism, both theoretical and practical. The Absolute is characterless and so devoid of thought and of activity, but by emanation—which is inconsistently substituted for activity—he sends forth reflections of himself, as the light streams forth from the sun. There is thus room for the conception of a hierarchy of beings—the *nous*, the world-soul, the individual souls, etc.; the emanations gradually become less perfect until the divine light fades into the utter darkness of matter or non-being. The task of the individual soul is to retrace this process, and pass from darkness to light—by the way, first of all, of the ordinary civic virtues, and then onwards through philosophical speculation until the stage of intuition is reached. At

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this final stage whatever separates the individual from the All is destroyed ; there is complete merging of the particular in the universal, a mystical state of unification which comes about as the result of prolonged and intense mental concentration. We have not here the ordinary use of the intellect, but rather an abstraction from it : “ All this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see ; you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision, which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birthright of all, which few learn to use.”<sup>1</sup> Neither can the vision be described intellectually in such a way that it may be communicated to others. It is a “ greatness not to be spoken of, not to be written.” “ If we hear, speak and write, it is but as guides to those that long to see : we send them to the Peace Itself, bidding them from words to the Vision : the teaching is of the path and the plan, seeing is the work of each soul for itself.”<sup>2</sup> Those who are familiar with modern theosophical literature will recognise how frequent is the emphasis upon this attitude of mind.

<sup>1</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead*, 1-6-2.

<sup>2</sup> McKenna's Edition of Plotinus, p. 157.

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In Neo-Platonism the ethical interest is kept rather in the background. It has been well said that here salvation is by deification rather than by sanctification. The aim is not so much to become like God as to become God. The individual spirit by sublimation may be merged in Deity, and may thus become central in the universe, a doctrine in which Indian readers find reproduced some of the fundamental thoughts in their philosophy and are proportionately attracted.

Another ancient system of thought with which theosophy finds a close kinship is Gnosticism. It is difficult to characterise this as a definite system, as it is so many-sided and passes through such various phases. It is of special interest for the study of the relation of theosophy to Christianity, seeing that Gnosticism seems to have supplied much of the material for the theosophical conception of Christianity. Gnosticism was ostensibly friendly to Christianity, though in reality it intellectualised the latter almost away to nothing. Theosophists, however, find it possible to describe the Gnostics as "those grand early Christians," and they apply to this

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mode of thought with special emphasis the idea that "the heresies are but the old philosophies disguised under new names."<sup>1</sup>

The teaching of the Gnostics is broadly similar to that of Neo-Platonism. A fundamental dualism is posited between God and the ordinary world. Man belongs essentially to the higher world, but he finds himself immersed in that lower world which has come into being through the fall of *Sophia* from out the Divine Fullness, and which persists under the sway of its own tyrant or demiurge. It was on account of the fall of *Sophia* that the material world took form out of chaos (a doctrine reminiscent of the Indian Sāṅkhya philosophy) and the problem for humanity is how to escape from this lower world. For the accomplishment of this end help is given by the *Soter*, a heavenly being who makes use, amongst other forms of manifestation, of the earthly body of Jesus, though he does not identify himself with it in any true sense of the word incarnation. Salvation is the result of knowledge of the secret truths imparted by Jesus and other teachers.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mrs. Cooper-Oakley, *Traces of a Hidden Tradition*, p. 10.

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Gnosticism was in possession of much occult lore, and the mystic rites associated with the various sects were many and various. It was by means of these rites and the cultivation of a general attitude of asceticism and negation that purification of the individual soul and ultimate union with God might be attained. As in Neo-Platonism, much emphasis is laid upon the necessity of revelation. All the Gnostic sects prided themselves upon the possession of a body of knowledge which could neither be discovered by efforts of the human intellect nor proved by logical methods nor communicated by ordinary description. It was to be carefully guarded as a deposit available only for the initiated, a precious inheritance of wonderful mystic teachings, derived according to the common view from Jesus Himself and His disciples, with whom the leaders of the sects believed that they were linked by a continuous, though secret tradition.

We must not, however, think of Gnosticism as exclusively or even predominantly Christian. According to the Gnostic view, Christ is simply a focus for religious ideas of an elevated character without being determinative of them,



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and it would for the most part ascribe little value to the historic life and death of Jesus. We must further remember that Gnosticism in several of its phases was in existence before the rise of Christianity. It is difficult indeed to assign its boundaries or affinities. As already indicated, it was not so much a definite system, Christian or other than Christian, as the expression of a mood of mind widely prevalent in the centuries immediately preceding and immediately succeeding the Christian era—a mood of unlimited syncretism. Into Gnosticism there passed influences of all kinds, influences coming from the mystery religions of Egypt and of Asia, of Greece and of Rome, and even from the Jewish religion. The ideas of a wide separation between God and man, of a dualism modified by emanations, of a hierarchy of divine and semi-divine beings, beneficent and demoniacal, whose help might be sought or whose malice might be averted—ideas of occult practices and secret rites, of mysterious knowledge which gave power over nature, of the definite distinction between the initiated and the uninitiated, of the importance of mystical associations, were everywhere prevalent.

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Gnosticism simply crystallised many of these floating ideas, and consideration of the whole situation moves us inevitably to the reflection that the theosophists of the present day, in India at least, would have been the Gnostics of the second century, so surprisingly similar are conditions in modern India to those of the Gnostic centuries in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean.

A study of the parallels afforded by the early Christian centuries is so serviceable for an understanding of the conditions of modern theosophy, that it is worth while continuing it further. The spirit of eclecticism which Gnosticism embodies is continued in much of the later literature of Rome. In the religious view of Plutarch, e.g., the interest of the worshipper was concentrated upon the deputies of God rather than upon God Himself. These deputies might be discovered amongst the gods of all religions and might be approached by every kind of rite. There was no need to make a selection amongst the different religions, for all might do good to men, and their myths, with a few exceptions ascribable to the influence of demons, were the embodiment of valuable

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religious and moral ideas. Even superstition will be better for our souls than atheism, and we may cling without hesitation to the current traditions and customs. We are not called upon to take any firm stand against abuses or to demand the reformation of religion, and even if we are not altogether satisfied, we may possess our souls in patience and in the meantime occupy our religiously inclined minds with occult practices and telepathic experiments.

The same tendencies are continued in a later writer, Apuleius, the author of the "Golden Ass." The passage in which Lord Ernle sets forth the religious attitude of Apuleius gives so illuminating a description of mental conditions almost exactly parallel to those of modern theosophy, that it would not be out of place to transcribe it in full: "As he (Apuleius) conceived the universe, there could be and there was, no contact between the One Supreme Ultimate God, or the celestial deputies who were his emanations, and the mortal dwellers upon the earth. Yet the affairs of men were ceaselessly cared for by the gods. There were links between the divine and human elements. If there was no contact there were

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channels of communication. Between the two extremes of existence were intermediate powers of a mixed nature, mediators between gods and men, carriers between heaven and earth, bearers from one to the other of prayer and bounties, supplications and blessings. Stronger than mortals, their powers partake both of the divine and the human : they are capable of rising into gods, and are recruited from the spirits of men. They are disembodied souls, susceptible to human passions, pains and pleasures, some good and kindly, others evil and malignant. The whole material world of men and things is eloquent with souls ; the air quivers and vibrates with sympathetic intelligence. Nor are they mere abstractions. In ordinary conditions the human vision is too clouded and the human ear too dull to behold or hear this celestial company. But in certain circumstances of the mind and body these spirits are visible to the eye ; and it is they who reveal the future to mortals by dreams, signs, oracles, visions, miracles. No possible channel of communication, therefore, should be neglected ; all should be investigated and explored.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Quarterly Review*, July, 1920.

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One of the most important elements entering into the composition of the spirit of the age embodied in Gnosticism was the influence of the Mystery Religions. It has been said by one writer that "incipient Gnosticism and the mystery religions are overlapping magnitudes."<sup>1</sup> In Greece the widespread influence of Orphism, in its refinements of Dionysiac worship, were amongst the most important factors, and the elaborate cults of Isis and Serapis were the vehicles of Egyptian religious tendencies. From Asia were imported the worship of Cybele and also Mithraism. All these mysteries were based upon the idea of the existence of intermediaries between God and man, and upon the belief that it was possible to gain the help of these intermediaries by ceremonies of purification which had as their ultimate aim the identification of the worshipper and the god—again salvation by deification rather than by obedience. Even Judaism was pressed into the service of this mysticism. There is affinity between the Jewish emphasis upon the "Name" of Jehovah and other phases of oriental mysticism. Attention was pointedly

<sup>1</sup> Kennedy, "St. Paul and the Mystery Religions," *Expositor*, 1912, p. 304.

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drawn to the ecstatic element in the prophetic literature, to the frequency of visions generally and to the love of apocalypse, although it had to be admitted that the moral interest in Judaism was always stronger and that stress was not laid upon the absorption or deification of the worshipper to the same extent as in other eastern religions.

All these influences coming from the East have been specially dwelt upon by theosophists, and the consideration of them seems to them to warrant a conclusion as to the wide prevalence of theosophic ideas in these early times and the existence of a secret tradition. The similarity between the systems is held to be dependent on this traditional body of truth, which, even if it cannot in every case be definitely rediscovered, may nevertheless be assumed as in every case fundamental and operative.

The study of the antecedents of theosophic doctrines which we have already undertaken seems to point to further lines of investigation which theosophists themselves enter upon with alacrity. They are especially interested in the possibility of showing that much of their teaching may be traced back to Indian sources,

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and that the philosophy which is enshrined in the esoteric cults is a republication or continuance of early Indian speculation. Whatever we may think of the historical value of the evidence which is brought forward in support of this contention, it is undoubtedly the case that there are remarkable affinities between theosophical and Indian philosophy. Ideas which are current at the present day in theosophy may have been handed down by mysterious communication from Indian originators or they may not, but it is none the less true that modern theosophical writers draw largely upon the records of Indian thought. The assertion of an Indian ancestry which is used to justify this borrowing is one of the main sources of the present popularity of theosophy in India. Theosophy is given a kindly welcome because it is felt to have a hereditary right of appeal to the Indian consciousness, and the thought that men of science, such as theosophists claim to be, should be so willing to confess their indebtedness, is attractive to Indian patriotism, both on political and religious grounds. For some minds, in India and elsewhere, theosophy markedly indicates the swing of the pendulum

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from the alleged materialism of the West in the direction of "an appreciation of the magnificent spiritual philosophy of the East."<sup>1</sup> The reception of it, it may be noted in passing, is all the more cordial because it seems to supply a measure of that vitalising power for which the Indian people long even more than they know, and which is so frequently lacking in their religious philosophy. And it makes this contribution without suggesting a breach with the past to the same extent as Christianity appears to do. Indeed theosophy tends to the other extreme of becoming an "immense flatterer" of the past of India, and of the occasional vagueness and excessive symbolism arising from the continuance of popular practices which the higher consciousness of the people has obviously left behind in theory. It has been said of Gnosticism that it represented "an effort of paganism to maintain its hold on the world by allying itself with a new and vital faith," and the diluted form of Christianity which theosophy infuses into the ancient faiths of India may be indicative of the same kind of alliance.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Edger, *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 12.



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But we must turn to the efforts which have actually been made to show the relation of Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Greek philosophy generally and the mystery religions to ancient Indian thought. Pythagoras, e.g., whose name is so prominent in the history of ancient Greek speculation, is said to have been an "initiate" who received his training in India. Mrs. Besant mentions this as an ascertained fact, but does not adduce the relevant proof.<sup>1</sup> M. Jacolliot, also, has no doubt about the derivation of Pythagorean ideas from India: "Although it appears from all the traditions relating to the subject, that Pythagoras went to India in Alexander's train and travelled in India and brought back this system from there, and was the only one of all the old Sophists that taught it, some people who have no eyes for anything that is not Greek, would have us believe that India was indebted to the land of Socrates for its earliest knowledge of philosophy."<sup>2</sup> This same writer quotes with approval the words of Colebrook: "In philosophy the Hindus are the masters of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Occult Science in India*, p. 112.

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the Greeks and not their disciples.” On the other hand it should be noted that Dr. Gauranganath Banerjea, a recent authoritative writer on ancient Indian thought, views with great suspicion the theory that Pythagoras was indebted to Eastern influences, and refuses “to believe for one moment that Socrates was indebted for the whole or at least a portion of his doctrines to an Indian traveller.” Dr. Banerjea concludes generally that “we do not find any statement historically established constraining us to admit the presence of any foreign influence on the development of Greek philosophy even in its flourishing age.”<sup>1</sup>

The impression of general indebtedness to India for thought of a theosophical character is strengthened by the theory that the Jewish doctrine of the Cabbala—which modern theosophy also claims as an intermediary between itself and ancient times—may be traced to Indian sources. There are certainly striking similarities between the Jewish doctrines and the teaching and practice of the ancient occultists in India. There is the same intense

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Hellenism in Ancient India*, p. 294.

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esotericism. It was forbidden, for example, to communicate the more sacred learning of the Cabbala to more than one person, and even he had to be most carefully selected with due regard to his wisdom and general intelligence. He had to be content with having only the headings of the chapters imparted to him. Now it is undoubtedly true that there was in India in ancient times a similar widespread system of initiation, and if analogy were a sufficient proof of derivation, the proof would be exceedingly strong. In India certain selected disciples were admitted to a jealously guarded knowledge which gave power over the secret processes of nature.

M. Jacolliot connects this specially with the worship of the *pitris*. The pupil is attended in all his studies by the shades of his ancestors. Those who wish to attain to the third degree of initiation into the mysteries must submit to protracted and rigorous training. Thereafter they may be admitted to the select groups of ten under the care of *gurus* to whom almost divine honours are paid. One of these *gurus* is specially connected with philosophy and another has charge of the manifested portion of

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the occult science. The secret knowledge was concealed behind certain formulas, and the idea of symbolism was employed almost universally in reference to the sacred writings. To think that the ordinary and obvious meaning might be the ultimate meaning was regarded as sacrilegious and preposterous. If the sacred books bore their meaning on the face of them for all to see, then the precautions as regards secrecy would be rendered nugatory : any one who might read the books would understand their teaching—an unthinkable state of affairs. The sacred writings must on no account be read without the aid of a *guru*, and there must be no unseemly haste. “Woe to him who would penetrate the real meaning of things before his head is white and he needs a cane to guide his steps,” is the warning of one of the sacred rubrics.<sup>1</sup>

But a still higher stage may be reached by a very select few. By contentment, mortification, prayer and meditation, the earnest disciple may reach the highest level of all. Here he will be independent of any *guru*. He will be in direct contact with the ancestral spirits

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Jacolliot, *Occult Science in India*, p. 103.

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who have preceded him to a higher world, and behind them again there rises a hierarchy of still more elevated beings, attaining ultimately direct communion with the fount of all being.

The extent to which this idea of a hierarchy of spiritual beings has captured the imagination of the theosophically inclined will be at once recognised by those who are familiar with later theosophical literature. We may note still another curious anticipation of modern times in the conception of the *akashic* fluid, by participation in which the worshipper enters into contact with the mysterious spirits and acquires both an understanding of the secrets of nature and power to set in motion her hidden forces. Such a fully initiated spirit will become superior to space and time, and even the weight of material bodies will be as nothing to him. He is in most serviceable connection with the ancestral and superior spirits, and by practices of a magical character even malignant spirits may be subdued to his will. In general his powers of thought and action will be marvellously intensified, and he will win a clear vision of the destiny of all humanity—claims

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extraordinarily similar to those made by modern theosophists on behalf of their leaders.<sup>1</sup>

The knowledge which may be obtained through the methods of initiation and the resulting insight is expounded in intellectual form in the orthodox philosophies of India. With these systems of thought theosophy claims the closest association. A fervent theosophist, Mr. Van Manen, expresses this connection in a striking, though somewhat bizarre, fashion. In the course of a passage in which he is arguing for the utter naturalness of the astral life and illustrating his point by alluding to the presence of astral visitors at theosophical lectures, he says: "Naturally our subjects have special interest for Orientals, and Indian members of our Society, whether living or dead, are likely to watch with comparatively keen interest the endeavours to spread their ideas in Western lands."<sup>2</sup> Theosophists,

<sup>1</sup> Jacolliot also points out that the kind of force here referred to is an anticipation of that officially recognised by Sir William Crookes and other members of the Royal Society of London,—“a force independent of muscular action, capable of moving bodies, of sometimes emitting melodious sounds, which is frequently directed with intelligence.” *op. cit.*, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> *Some Occult Experiences*, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> We might compare also the reference of the Swami Abhedananda to modes of thought which have a certain relationship to theosophy. “Faith-healers, mental healers, Christian Scientists of to-day, have appreciated only one hundredth part of the mental power which a Yogi in India claims to possess.” *Spiritual Unfoldment*, p. 17.

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however, find it necessary on occasion to supply a safeguard in connection with their dependence upon the records of Indian thought. Difficulties might arise if these records, *as they stand* and as they are in general circulation, were always regarded as infallible. Supposing they were found to contain contradictions of accepted theosophical doctrines, what then? A way of escape from the dilemma is found in the argument that the records in circulation are truncated. They contain teachings which are suitable for communication to the multitude, but the more essential teachings are to be found in records hidden away in the monasteries, and these records may be appealed to in time of trouble, i.e., in cases of open discrepancy. Madame Blavatsky, e.g., says that "the original treatises of Sāṅkara have not yet fallen into the hands of the Philistines."<sup>1</sup> She has an even more extraordinary argument in explanation of discrepancies between the Upanishads and theosophic teaching. She suggests that Buddha had caught the central meaning of the teaching of the Upanishads, but that the Brahmans did not wish this

<sup>1</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 271.

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teaching to be given to the multitude. Therefore they hit upon the device of allowing the promulgation of certain corrupt Upanishads in order that Buddha might apparently be refuted. It is to these deliberately corrupted portions of the Upanishads that any degenerate teachings of the present day which contradict pure theosophic doctrine and yet claim the authority of the ancient sacred books, may be traced. The alleged genuine originals are, however, not produced either by Madame Blavatsky or by her followers, and it is obvious that such appeals to mystery and silence, "while they admit of no refutation, produce no conviction."

But these aberrations in argument may be disregarded, and it may be freely admitted that it is from the Brāhmanas and the Upanishads that the theosophists even of to-day draw much of their most important material. A passage, e.g., from the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa* might almost be described as, in anticipation, a theosophical charter, inasmuch as it sets forth so explicitly the favourite doctrine of a progress through various grades of being, conditioned by the degree of enlightenment



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attained : “ Let a man meditate upon the true Brahman. Now man here is possessed of understanding, and according to how great his understanding is, when he departs this world, so does he, on passing away, enter yonder world.”<sup>1</sup> The same idea of a procession through various spheres, with the ultimate aim of attaining identification with the Absolute Being, is expressed over and over again in the Upanishads.<sup>2</sup> In general also, theosophy accepts uncompromisingly the intellectualism of the resulting Vedānta, with its unflinching monism, as well as the idea of an unknowable ground from which all things proceed. Madame Blavatsky says that there was no possibility of understanding occultism before the words *sat* and *asat*<sup>3</sup> were understood.<sup>4</sup> A very slight difference may perhaps be noted in regard to the attitude to dreams. For the Vedantist the dream world is a stage in the negative process of withdrawal from the actual : for the theosophist it is a medium of positive and clear vision.

<sup>1</sup> *Sat. Brab.*, x. 6.3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. especially *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad*, VI., 2, 15, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Fundamental conceptions in Indian Theosophy.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Secret Doctrine*, p. 449, also p. 276.

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To the Sāṅkhya philosophy the debt of theosophy is even greater than to the Upanishads and the Vedānta. Much of the anthropology of theosophy is influenced by Sankyan conceptions. The ideas of the *purusha* and *prakṛiti* are specially significant for our purpose. They are antithetic and yet co-operating principles. The *purusha* is full of light, but without activity, and through association with *prakṛiti*, which is essentially active, is raised to consciousness. The business of the soul is to re-establish the essential difference from the world of matter. Here we seem to have an anticipation of the theosophical doctrine of the Divine Monad descending through the lower grades of being and forming for itself a subtle body out of the material world. The Sankyan idea of the "*linga sarira*" or subtle body, serving as the basis of personality and passing from birth to birth until the definiteness of personality is worn off, is distinctly theosophic. So also is the idea that, though there is a plurality of souls, yet when the soul reaches the highest level of development and is trembling on the verge of purification, it is permissible to speak of the *purusha* in the singular: in anticipation, the

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process of development has been completed and the individual has been merged in the universal. And the practical motive for endeavour under the two systems is throughout the same. It is the discounting of suffering, not so much through the destruction of its sources, as through the diminution of its significance *pari passu* with the increasing detachment of the soul from matter.

With the less intellectual and more emotional and mystical Yoga philosophy, theosophy presents many parallels. It might indeed be said to be a modern Yoga, and one of Mrs. Besant's books bears with justice the title of *An Introduction to Yoga*. The aims of the ancient and the modern disciplines are the same. The Yogi tries by various devices to reach detachment as well as integration of soul so that return to the lower phases of being at least may not be necessary. As he progresses in the spiritual life, he attains to a more and more elevated power of vision : he sees colours which are invisible to ordinary eyes, and hears sounds which are inaudible to ordinary ears. He may fall into mystic slumber and on awaking find himself in the possession of marvellous

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powers of control over nature. For him the impenetrable may become penetrable and the heavy light; he may distribute his personality so as virtually to annihilate space, and in the vision of the past and the future to which he attains time will become for him as though it were not. In all these claims the theosophist of to-day faithfully follows the Yogi of ancient India.

In conclusion, it may be noted that this debt of theosophy to the past of India is always acknowledged with the utmost readiness. Indeed, one might say that the readiness is sometimes excessive, for, if ever the origin of a theosophic doctrine is for a moment in dispute, an obligation to Indian thought is suggested with the least possible delay. In general it might be said that theosophy looks backwards just as Indian thought itself does, and it is to Indian thought that the backward look is mainly directed.

We indicated at the beginning of this chapter that theosophists tend to adopt a somewhat peculiar explanation of the continuity of their doctrines through the centuries. They conceive of these doctrines as passing *through* time

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rather than as developing *in* time. As Madame Blavatsky says, "The exoteric doctrines may often have been altered, the esoteric never."<sup>1</sup> They originate from and are under the providential guidance of a hierarchy of adepts, the brotherhood of the White Lodge, who are the guardians of the divine truth preserved in the mystic tradition. The similarity which may be observed amongst the fundamental truths of all religions, is to be explained by the fact that, whenever necessity arises, the brotherhood of the Masters send one of their number to found a new religion which shall indeed be suitable to the varying needs and capacities of the people it is to benefit, but shall at the same time contain in all essential respects the same sacrosanct body of truths as other religions. The continuity of religious truth is, therefore, due to identity rather than development.

As we have seen, Mrs. Besant and other theosophists are vigorously opposed to the idea of the gradual development of higher religions out of the crude animistic forms which are the product of the religious consciousness of

<sup>1</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 312.

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ignorant and terrified savages. "Comparative Mythology" is an opprobrious designation which enables Mrs. Besant to dismiss almost with contempt the greater part of modern investigation in this sphere, and she reserves the term "Comparative Religion" for her own theory that the essential truth of every religion was promulgated in a pure form at the commencement of that religion and that all subsequent history has been but a tale of degeneration. In order to discover its own fundamental truth a religion must always look back to a "golden age." The theory of development, it is argued, cannot be true in view of the fact that the original teachings of Moses, Buddha, Christ and Mohammed have never been improved upon, but have rather been corrupted through the influence of superstition and selfishness. In the same way the savage beliefs of to-day, to which "Comparative Mythologists" attach so much importance, should be regarded as "the distorted and dwarfed descendants of true religious beliefs."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Mrs. Besant is so afraid of the theory of natural development that she is averse even

<sup>1</sup> *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 8.

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from the idea of inheritance, and hardly gives full support to the favourite theosophical doctrine that the main body of their teachings has been derived from India by transmission through the ages. The truth has not been handed on from one group of human teachers to another ; the custody of it has been vested in higher beings. " It is not, however, necessary to suppose that the nations of antiquity drew from India, but all alike drew from the one great source, the Grand Lodge of Central Asia, which sent out its initiates to every land."<sup>1</sup> This lodge is described variously as the trunk from which all religions spring or as the thread which runs through all religions, binding them in one. The initiates are men who have come from other worlds and other humanities than ours, but their numbers are reinforced by men of our present race, who, throughout the centuries of human history, have passed through the various grades of training and finally received initiation. There is perhaps a slight inconsistency in this allowance of the possibility of reinforcement. Why, we may ask, should there be any need for adding to the number of

<sup>1</sup> *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 27.

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initiates if the teaching is complete at the beginning? On the other hand, to deny the need and to say that the contributions made by the later members are superfluous, would be to suggest that their long continued experience has produced no effect. Further, we find that even the original members, i.e., those not drawn from our humanity, have been evolved by a process similar to that of which we have experience under human conditions. We thus cannot get away from evolution after all; we can only, by pushing it further back, create the illusion that the body of truth preserved by the adepts has existed for all time in a finished and complete form.

The Adepts form a brotherhood which, so far as it can be located at all, has its habitation in the mountains of Thibet—at least it is alleged that the best brotherhood belongs to Thibet. But, according to prevailing theosophical claims, the members of the brotherhood are really independent of spatial conditions. They can communicate with each other, though they never meet, and they make use of a common language and a common symbolism. Great respect should always be shown



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to them. The best mode of reference to them is to speak of them as "They," carefully noting the capital letter. Their duty is to watch over the religious development of humanity. In their exalted councils they take into consideration any urgent need for the foundation of a new religion, and, if the necessity is admitted, they commission one of their number to found and take charge of it. And their communications to humanity are always carefully adapted to the period, race and qualifications of the learners. There might be said to be both an exoteric and an esoteric section amongst those who are thus instructed. The generality of men are not overwhelmed with a revelation which is too great for their comprehension, but wherever any can be found with sufficient qualifications, to them a portion of the divine Science is communicated. The Adepts are occasionally willing to take special pupils, and Madame Blavatsky may be reckoned as one of these pupils. For those who are thus honoured the burden is well-nigh intolerable, not only because of the weighty character of the truth which has been communicated, but because of

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the scrupulosity with which the secret of the revelation must be kept. Mr. Sinnett speaks of Madame Blavatsky as an initiate, "capable of communicating with both worlds, and carrying about with her the almost intolerable burden of a great secret."<sup>1</sup> He does not tell us how he knew anything of this secret if Madame Blavatsky was forbidden to reveal it, neither does he explain how it was that Koot Hoomi—the Master in this case—did not come more persistently and effectively to the aid of his pupil, especially during her troublous times in Madras.

It is obvious that the claims of the pupils may lead to great difficulty. They form a second section of the true Theosophical Society, standing in a privileged position between the Masters (or First Section) and the mass of the members. Mrs. Besant, in an address she delivered in 1912, complains rather bitterly of the way in which the claims of the Second Section had been ignored, and the nominee of the Masters had been overlooked.<sup>2</sup> Evidently the assumption of transcendental

<sup>1</sup> *Occult World* p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Theosophy and the Theosophical Society*, p. 96.

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knowledge had resulted in domination if not in dogmatism, and here we are on the verge of a danger which is never far distant when claims to a transcendental origin of truth are made. Such claims may indeed be an expression of the reverence which ought to be felt for truth and may indicate a sense of its eternity. But under such conditions truth is apt to be regarded as a gift rather than as an attainment, and the vessel in which it is contained is esteemed as if it were of pure gold rather than of earth. Instead of remaining as leaders of men, admittedly great but yet subject to the common failings of humanity, its custodians are elevated to the rank of demi-gods, possessed of infallibility. The casket becomes too precious ever to be opened: truth is imprisoned rather than preached. In this way preparation is made in advance for the too frequent dogmatism of "those who know," and the importance of the teaching both of history and of scientific experience is correspondingly diminished.

## CHAPTER III

### The Contents of Theosophic Teaching

THE teaching shows unmistakable traces of both its historical and its transcendental origin. On the one hand, it looks back to the doctrines of esoteric sects which have persisted through the centuries, and it bases itself in particular on the teaching of ancient Indian philosophy. On the other hand, it introduces also from time to time conceptions which cannot be traced to any historical source, but embody authoritative pronouncements of the mysterious brotherhood of Adepts or Initiates. In this latter respect the source-book of the teaching might be described as the "etheric" or "akashic" record, which may be read only by the initiated and in which is laid up by the Masters the results of their supernatural powers of penetration into the secrets of the universe.

It would be unfair to expect from theosophical writers any great degree of definiteness

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in the statement of their theories. In addition to the limitation imposed by the intrinsic difficulties of speculations relating to another world—limitations which they share with all thinkers—they have to adjust themselves to the necessity for esoteric caution. They do not wish to *impose* belief upon those who are not ready for it, neither are they permitted to tell all they know. In regard to the first point Mr. Sinnett says: "The Absolute structure of Occult belief is something which, from its nature, can only be slowly built up in the mind of each intellectual architect. . . . They (theosophists) are ready enough to supply the need, but every one must grow his own tree of knowledge for himself."<sup>1</sup> It is obvious that here there is at least a slight encouragement to vagueness in connection with difficult problems, and the danger is increased by the restrictions imposed upon the teachers either by themselves or by others. Of the authorities represented in *Isis Unveiled* it is said: "They do not state plainly what they know because they would be asked, How do you know it? And they could not answer this without divulging

<sup>1</sup> *Occult World*, p. 171.

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secrets, or without promising supernatural assurances which they would not always have at hand for each learner.”<sup>1</sup>

A metaphysical foundation for the theosophical system is found in the conception of an unknown and unknowable ground of all things, in reference to which we may adopt whole-heartedly the Spinozistic dictum that “all determination is negation,” and may refrain from all futile attempts at description. Of this primal Being we can only say that it “is,” and that it is the sum of all existence and contains within itself the germs of countless universes. We cannot describe it as more than potentiality. We cannot even call it substance, for it becomes substance only in the manifested universe. In itself it is a principle and abstract. It cannot be called essence, because it cannot be identified with being of any kind conceivable by the human intellect. And in accordance with these negations, Madame Blavatsky concludes that “it is best described as neither spirit nor matter but both . . . *Parabrahman* and *mulaprakriti* are one.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Occult World*, p. 171.

<sup>2</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 273.

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Of each universe a second God or "Logos" takes charge, determining for himself the plan of his operations, and preforming in idea all the varieties of existence which are to appear in the course of evolution. As the universe with which we are concerned emerges out of the primitive nebulous material, we find in it a central sun, as the physical symbol of the Logos, and seven planetary chains, each consisting of seven globes of which our own globe is one. This last also consists of seven interpenetrating worlds, the lowest being the physical world in which by long continued processes the various kingdoms of nature are formed.<sup>1</sup>

An upward enumeration of the interpenetrating worlds gives us seven planes—the Physical, the Astral, the Mental (in two divisions), the Intuitionist, the Spiritual and the Monadic. These worlds do not stand outside each other, but interfuse, the physical world being permeated with the subtler form of being. The control of these worlds is delegated by the

<sup>1</sup> Of these kingdoms of nature there are seven divisions. The ordinary "kingdoms," such as animal, vegetable and mineral, are the highest of these, but further down the scale there are kingdoms of undefined character, about which we are at present almost wholly ignorant.

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Logos to various subordinate powers. Under the Logos or solar deity are seven planetary spirits and under these again there are the host of angels or Devas—superhuman spiritual beings. Our world is under the charge of a particular representative of the Logos, and this great official again delegates his functions to members in charge of departments. One of these departments, it may be noted, is the department of religion and education, and, whenever the official at the head of the department decides that a new revelation is needed, he either himself visits the world of human beings or sends a member of the great college of Adepts to enlighten it. As the human race progresses, the ranks of the accredited teachers, which are at first filled only by delegates from higher systems, may be recruited from amongst the most enlightened and most spiritually progressive human beings.

In this multiplicity of whirling world-systems it is difficult to fix upon the exact stage of cosmic development with which we are immediately concerned. The number seven is exceedingly popular in the theosophical cosmic scheme. There are, as we



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have seen, seven planetary chains, and each consists of seven globes. There are seven kingdoms of nature, and in our own globe there are seven interpenetrating worlds. When we consider the matter from a temporal point of view, and take account of human progress through these conditions, we are again confronted by the dominance of the number seven. It is our destiny as human beings to make the round of the planets, and on each planet we pass through seven Root races, each of which contains seven sub-races. Theosophic authorities tell us that we are now making the round of the planets for the fourth time, and in this fourth round we have passed through three of the planets. If we cry out for stability amidst this amazing dance of figures, we are told that we are at present upon the earth, and chiefly concerned with the physical plane. But still we are under the dominance of figures. We are upon the earth, but we are only doing one of many rounds. This particular round is the fourth of the series, and we have three more to make. In the present round, to which we may struggle to confine our attention, we have passed through four of the Root races,

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the one from which we have just emerged being the Atlantæan. At present we are working our way through the sub-races of the fifth Root-race, and have reached the fifth sub-race. The powers of the sixth are just about to dawn upon us, and, according to some, a local habitation is being prepared for this in a new continent which is gradually arising from the depth of the western ocean. While we wait for its appearing we may draw breath, noting only a variant anticipation of the future by Madame Blavatsky, who prophesied that the sixth sub-race would appear in America, and the less definite but more appreciable expectation of certain theosophists who claim that they are assembling in their society the select souls who will take part in the founding of this new race and guide its destinies.

It may require an effort to take altogether seriously this highly artificial and intricate cosmology, but it is an effort which ought to be made. We should remember, for one thing, how common is the preference for definite numbers, and especially for the number seven, in religious cosmological speculation. The exact numbers are really of little consequence

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even in theosophy. The importance of the cosmology lies in its attempt, after a mechanical fashion it is true, to set forth in intelligible form its conception of a vast development, occupying age-long periods of time. And this idea of development is surely worthy of careful consideration whatever we may think of some of the details. We may perhaps notice in passing how composite the scheme is, and in particular how it combines the ideas of cyclic process and of development. Each division of the process has, it would seem, to be passed through many times—we have, e.g., to make the round of the planets seven times—but yet throughout the vast scheme an increasing purpose runs, and the very vastness of it would seem to make repetition impossible. We may perhaps reach a mediating conception in the symbol of a spiral. We do not always go back to the same stage, but perform the round at a somewhat higher level.<sup>1</sup> Still, when all is said and done in justification of the intricacies of the cosmology, it is impossible to get away from the feeling that theosophists are very frequently cosmological spendthrifts as regards

<sup>1</sup> Cf. M. C. Sturge, *Theosophy and Christianity*, p. 46.

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time, and that too often for them a million of years is but the flickering of an eyelid.

We cannot enter more fully into the details of the cosmology, and we must now confine our attention to the various stages of the development of the human soul within this setting, keeping always in mind the seven-fold world which is the background of the human drama, and the control by one of the theosophic Masters of the particular portion of the universe in which the individual soul finds itself.

From the Divine world of the Logos the human soul emerges like a spark from a central fire, and appears in the Monadic world. It is then ready to unfold the trinity that is latent within it—the trinity of will, wisdom and activity—and it manifests itself in the three worlds—the Spiritual, the Intuitional and the Higher Mental worlds. The method of evolution or rather of devolution is, that, as it enters each new world, the spirit carries with it the lowest molecules of the world it has just left and combines with them the finest molecules of the world it is just entering. In this way the gulfs between the worlds are bridged

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over. As far as we have yet traced the development, the Monad has remained merely an individuality—which in all theosophic writings is the higher phase—and has not yet acquired the characteristics of personality. The critical humanising step is taken in the transition between the two divisions of the mental world. As it passes from the Higher Mental or Causal world to the Lower Mental world, the Monad becomes fully human and is equipped for the continuance of the downward process. Then it takes the two final steps—first, from the Lower Mental to the Astral or emotional body, and finally from there to the physical world, the ordinary world of our mortal life which we live in the body visible to the senses. In regard to the last stage it should be noted that some theosophists depart from the usual view, and in addition to the physical body, recognise also an etheric double, finding this latter a very useful explanation for some of the phenomena of life.

This incarnation reaching down to the physical plane takes place over and over again. The motive, either for the descent at all, or for its repetition, is not made sufficiently clear. Mrs. Besant indeed suggests, “It is his

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own will to live in all spheres, and not only in one, that draws him into manifestation."<sup>1</sup> But this is a repetition of the fact to be explained rather than an explanation for it. If we ask for a reason why the Monad's own will should lead it to manifestation the explanation is given that the Monad must learn to function on all grades of being in order that its latent faculties may become explicit. The non-swimmer is drowned just because he cannot swim, although he has the potentiality for swimming, but the swimmer may move freely in water and thus reveal his powers in a fuller manner. Similarly, diffused experience will expand the powers of the Monad through contact with all grades of being. We are not told, however, why there should be these three grades of lower worth, or why the Monad should feel called upon to function in them if it is complete in its own higher sphere, and if, in particular, no defining and outward movement such as that of love is ascribed to it. We are not concerned here, however, with reflections upon how the soul got into its present position so much as with the manner

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy*, p. 26.

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of the upward movement of escape. We find that throughout there is a suggestion of the pessimistic judgment that the physical world, or the world of ordinary experience, is one from which escape is essentially demanded. In a sense, of course, every religion implies aspiration after deliverance of this sort. No one is content ; but contentment may be reached in two ways—by escape or by transformation, and theosophy lays almost exclusive stress upon the former.

The divine Monad has dipped down into the physical plane of mortal existence, and, finding itself there subject to many ills, it feels called upon to retrace its steps to the heaven from which it emerged. From the physical it must ascend through all the grades of being until it reaches the source of all. And it must do this not once but many times, until the complete lesson has been learnt and the consequences of all the deeds done in the body have been worked out ; until the soul, having got rid of the hampering vestures of personality is fitted to regain the pure characterless being of its essential existence, and so merge in the universal.

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At death the ego passes from the physical to the astral plane. In this new world the deeds we have done on the physical plane will determine our fate, but still more influential will be the thoughts and feelings we have cherished during our mundane existence. The astral world is the region of passion and desire, and we remain in it until our souls are cooled from the heat of our longings. If our desires have been elevated, they are easily and quickly satisfied and we are soon ready to escape to the next higher phase of being. But if our passions have been gross, we find that we have made a purgatory for ourselves. We have to endure for a lengthened period the almost unbearable pain of desires which cannot be satisfied. Their satisfaction has hitherto depended on the presence of physical objects, and in the absence of these, the persistence of desire is productive of nothing but pain—a pain so intense that “it well-nigh breaks the heart of those who witness it.”<sup>1</sup> The conditions of the pain are said to be provided by an arrangement of the astral particles according to which those will be on the surface which are

<sup>1</sup> Edger, *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 99.



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capable of receiving vibrations from the grossest particles in the environment.<sup>1</sup>

Yet this pain has a useful purpose. It creates a tendency in the mind of the sufferer which will lead him to avoid such pleasures in his future physical existence. His sombre experience will result in cautious procedure. "Torn by an agony of longing, frustrated by the impossibility of gratification, there is branded on the soul as with a red-hot iron: 'It is foolish to yield to gratification that brings about the misery I am now suffering' . . . You are only finally rid of a craving when you cease to desire that which gratifies it; and the teaching of pain kills the desire."<sup>2</sup>

A slightly higher destiny awaits those who on earth, whilst they have avoided vice and crime, have yet occupied themselves almost entirely with trivial worldly pursuits. They will find themselves in an environment corresponding to that to which they were accustomed on earth, but there will be little substantiality in their surroundings and consequently no full satisfaction of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Leadbeater, *Text-book of Theosophy*, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Theosophy and Life's Deeper Problems*, p. 59.

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their desires. The length of time during which they will remain in the astral world and partial satisfaction be possible, will be proportional to the extent to which these desires have occupied their mind while on earth. Those who in their physical life have occupied themselves with the higher intellectual and æsthetic desires, and have thought more of the pleasures of heaven than of earth, will be most fully, even though only temporarily, satisfied. The ache of unsatisfied longing will be reduced to a minimum. The musician will hear beautiful music and the artist will feast his eyes upon beautiful pictures, whilst the student will spend his days in an astral library, acquiring information such as was not at his disposal on earth. In general, they will have a glorious sense of freedom, and will no longer be compelled to do what they do not wish to do. They will have an opportunity of perfecting their powers and of transforming their experiences into faculties. They will thus be ready for the more intensive culture of their particular interests during their next stay upon earth.\*

\* Cf. Mrs. Besant's saying: "Power is pain transcended." *Introduction to Yoga*, p. 111.

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Through the exercise of occult powers of penetration and through the teaching of accredited teachers, we may obtain some interesting details about this astral world. Indeed, it might even be true to say that a part of the knowledge is accessible to the ordinary man. The kind of information we get in confused dreams, and, more rarely, in vivid dreams, is an anticipation of the clearer and fuller knowledge which the clairvoyant claims. By these various means, usual and unusual, we may discover, amongst other things, that the astral body is, like all higher bodies, ovoid in shape, and that it projects even during life a few inches beyond the physical body. Seeing, however, that the astral matter is attracted freely by the physical matter, we find that much of the astral matter is built into the form of the physical body, and, even if detached again from it, may still be recognised as a dense mist, having in shadowy outline a human form, and encompassed by a finer ovoid mist. We have seen that, in determining our destiny in the astral world, our thoughts and desires play a most important part, and it is through differentiated rates of vibration that the varied effect is produced.

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With the theory of vibration there is connected, in scientific fashion, a theory of astral colouring. The vibrations of unselfish affection produce bodies of pale rose colour; intellectual effort produces yellow bodies, and devotional feeling expresses itself in blue. There is in general an æsthetic attractiveness about the idea of the colour effects of our thoughts and desires, but, somehow or other, the details fail to satisfy us to the same extent. When we are told, e.g., that "a man who frequently feels high devotion, soon comes to have a large area of blue permanently existing in his astral body,"<sup>1</sup> we struggle in vain to maintain the appropriate æsthetic mood. We reach, however, information of a higher ethical quality regarding the astral plane, when we read that our prayers produce beings functioning as guardian angels, and that the petitions of a mother for her son may operate as an actual force protecting him in the moment of temptation or of danger. It is obvious that in these descriptions of the astral world we leave the world of sense perception and enter the realm of speculation. There is a danger that

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Leadbeater, *Textbook of Theosophy*, p. 57.

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instead of obtaining reliable information about the world beyond the senses, we may be simply giving a spurious objectivity and concreteness to our own imaginings. It is a danger akin to that of which St. Augustine was conscious in connection with the Neo-Platonists whom he describes as "strutting in the buskin of what they deem higher knowledge," and whom he accuses of a changing the glory of the Divine incorruptible nature into idols and many kinds of images." <sup>1</sup> We shall discuss this point more fully in considering the relations between theosophy and science. In the meantime it is sufficient to note that theosophists are not aware of any lurking danger in this transition from the visible to the invisible world. They are convinced of the direct reality of the astral plane, and they argue that they may take up the same attitude to it as to the sense-world. One of their leaders says that the astral world is "as real as Charing Cross." <sup>2</sup>

From the astral plane those who are ready, may pass to the Lower Mental world or world of *devachan*. It is not indeed necessary that all

<sup>1</sup> *Confessions*, VII. 2, 3, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Leadbeater, *Astral Plane*, p. 10.

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even who are properly qualified should “take their *devachan*” immediately. Some of them may desire, in a self-sacrificing spirit, to return to earth in order to render further service, in which case they will have to obtain the requisite permission from a high authority, and in the meantime will have to confine themselves strictly to the astral plane until the matter can be arranged.<sup>1</sup>

The account which is given of the astral world may be for the most part repeated in connection with the world of *devachan*; only the development is fuller and the theory of vibrations is applied in such a way as to give greater opportunity for ethical discrimination. Just as a musical note may produce corresponding overtones on higher octaves, so may the vibrations of the astral world, and especially colour vibrations, react upon the mental world. The higher divisions of this world—the world of the causal body—is indeed susceptible to very few vibrations; but the lower division may receive—though still very sparingly—

<sup>1</sup> The description which Mr. Leadbeater gives of this interval somehow suggests imprisonment in a station waiting-room under the control of a rather self-important station-master, who refuses to allow any liberty to the passengers until the proper train arrives.—Cf. *Astral Plane*, p. 37.

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contributions from the astral world. The law of cause and effect holds good here also—we shall reap as we have sown.<sup>2</sup>

The principle which operates in the heavenly world, is that nothing which is selfish or merely personal may enter into it, but that, whenever we have obeyed an unselfish impulse, we have thereby won a right of entrance. And, as there is no one so degraded as never to have been visited by an altruistic movement of soul, every one will at least pass the portals of the heavenly world, even though the stay of some may be of the shortest possible duration. Those whose unselfishness upon earth has chiefly shown itself in family devotion will in the heavenly world be surrounded by those whom they love and will have with them the freest and fullest communion. All hampering limitations of the earth and even of the astral world will be removed, and those of our activities which have been least dependent upon bodily conditions will have the most unrestricted development.

<sup>2</sup> Again Mr. Leadbeater supplies a curious detail about the heavenly world. The shape of the heavenly or mental body is, in general, ovoid. In the case of the ordinary man the thicker end of the ovoid will be downwards, whereas in the case of the man who has perseveringly repressed his grosser thoughts, the shape will be that of an egg resting on the thinner end.—*Textbook of Theosophy*, p. 50.

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On this principle the impersonal activities of the poet, the musician and the sculptor will result in the highest bliss of creative activity. The musician will discover harmonies such as he never knew on earth, and the artist will rejoice in unimagined beauty. The religious devotee will pierce through the mists that hide from him the clear vision of the Divine. Through the enhancement of his faculties of comprehension, he will know even as he is known, and will close with all he flows from, soul with soul. For the most part, the bliss of this heavenly world is indescribable, but occasionally and in our highest moods we have a foretaste of the glory which is beyond all words.

The duration of our stay in the heavenly world will depend on our deserts. The worst of men will remain but for a moment, so to speak, whereas the reward of the blest will be age-long bliss. During our stay, be it long or short, we shall concentrate or realise all that has been good in our previous lives. We shall take it into the essence of our souls, and it will express itself again as a faculty or capacity for leadership and for service. When we return to earth again we shall be wiser, purer, nobler, and more loving,



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more fitted in every way for the higher service of humanity. As Mrs. Besant puts it : " The visible and invisible worlds are inter-related, and those can best serve the visible by whom the energies of the invisible can be wielded."<sup>1</sup> \*

Sooner or later the time will come when we must lose even this heavenly (or, Lower Mental) body, and before we return to earth again we pass into a higher state of being—into the causal body or higher division of the mental world. According to theosophical teaching this is a most important transition, for at this point we transcend personality and realise the divine or individualised Monad which persists through all the lower stages. After all, the physical, the astral and the heavenly bodies constitute but wrappings

<sup>1</sup> *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to compare with what has been set forth above the account of the views of the Cambridge Platonist, Henry More, given by Prof. Sorley in his recently published *History of English Philosophy*, p. 36 : " The soul is never entirely separate from matter ; for then it would be out of the world. . . . At death the soul is separated from its terrestrial body, but only to inhabit an aerial, from which again it may pass into an ethereal or celestial body. In the aerial vehicle, such as demons also inhabit, the soul is not quite exempt from fate ; but in the celestial vehicle it is perfect and secure, ' out of the reach of that evil principle whose dominion is commensurable with misery and death.' The upward progress of the soul depends on its moral development ; and of it More gives a detailed description, although it is only to show that his hypothesis is intelligible and not as ' solicitous whether things be just so as I have set them down. ' "

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which this persistent Monad makes use of and which it discards one by one in the process of development. We should not, however, regard this causal body as wholly separate from the other bodies. It stands in organic relation with them and the karmic law still holds. Into the realm of the causal body we may take with us the most refined achievements of our spirit, though only those. In some cases the sum total of achievement will be very small, and, consequently, though all attain, most relapse into unconsciousness as their heavenly body slips from them. When consciousness returns, it comes but as a momentary flash of light, in which the soul, standing like a traveller on a mountain peak between two oceans, beholds the vast expanse of the past and of the future. Then the darkness descends and the vision fades away. For a few souls of a greater spiritual intensity and fuller powers of penetration there is reserved a higher destiny. They enter consciously upon this stage of the beatific vision; they attain to the knowledge of all there is to know and partake of the bliss of unbroken communion with God. But the privilege of remaining on this highest level

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is given to very few. The majority are unable to function in the rarified atmosphere, and they must return to the world again. The saint must climb slowly down the steps he has so painfully ascended. He must pass from stage to stage assuming the appropriate vesture of each level, the covering, first of the heavenly body and then of the astral and then of the physical. The soul may carry with it experience gained during previous lives, and during the intermediate existences, experience is stored up, as we have seen, in the form of faculties.

The descent to earth again and the entrance into a new physical body is by no means fortuitous. It is guided by the high Intelligences who control the world-system in all its workings. We are told that a competent astrologer may understand the laws of this control, though to most of us they are a sealed book.<sup>1</sup> The soul is placed in a body and in an environment which will enable it to make a further advance. It will enter into relations with those to whom it still owes a debt contracted in a former life,\* or who are under some obligation to it.<sup>2</sup> Through

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mrs. Besant, *Ancient Wisdom*, p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Edger, *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 113.

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the various stages of the physical life once more it will pass, until the time comes for it to cross over into the astral life. Thence it will move upwards to the heavenly and the causal bodies, and then from the summit down into the valley of embodiment, over and over again. Through millions of incarnations we shall make our slow and toilsome way, just as the greater world passes also through its innumerable phases. The law of *karma* will operate as the link between the different incarnations. It will determine whether our stay in the higher world shall be long or short and what shall be the manner of our appearing again upon the earth. The aim of all our striving will be to shorten our stay in the lower worlds and to lengthen it in the higher, until we shall be no longer strangers in the heavenly and higher worlds but shall live into their conditions and find unlimited opportunities for enjoyment and free activity. The hampering restrictions of personality will fade away from us as the soul returns to and dwells in its original divine essence.

There is no room for pride in respect of our relations to those of our fellows who are below

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us on the moral scale. They are simply at a lower stage of development than we are. They are younger souls who will inevitably grow older and better in the course of the multitude of incarnations. We should not too severely condemn the evil that is in their lives, but should regard it as the symbol of their low stage of development. There is a call for pity rather than for harsh judgment as we remember the burden which these lower souls bring with them from their past. What appears to be failure may indeed be a noble, though not an entirely successful, struggle against an inheritance of evil habit. And we may apply the same principles of merciful judgment to ourselves. It is legitimate to argue that our past karmic action may have forged for us almost unbreakable chains; "under such circumstances we are driven to do wrong, even when we wish to do right, and we feel ourselves helpless as a straw driven before the wind."<sup>1</sup> There is the further comforting thought that the sins which we commit may be atoned for in a future life, if they cannot be adequately dealt with in this one. Moreover, as we look upwards to

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Theosophy*, p. 65.

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those who are far above us in moral attainment, there is no need for despair, for sooner or later we shall reach to the place where they are. Why should we hurry or be anxious? Our past limits our present very seriously. "If we are mentally dull, we cannot suddenly become brilliant; if we have few opportunities we cannot always create them."<sup>1</sup> In any case, there is plenty of time, in other lives if not in this, for attaining to the end towards which we are moving. We may indeed hasten the process of development by our efforts, if—it might be added by other than theosophists—we can sufficiently convince ourselves that it is not futile to attempt to hasten an inevitable consummation. We must not expect, however, that our efforts will bring about more than insignificant changes in any one life, though they may result in enormous changes in future lives. But in these future lives we shall not have, except in the rarest possible cases, any consciousness of the lives out of which they have sprung.

In its adoption of the theory of transmigration theosophy claims to be reproducing

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Theosophy*, p. 64.

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the speculations contained in many different systems of thought. Christ is said to have had this theory in mind when he suggested that John the Baptist was the prophet Elias come to life again. Theosophists argue also that the transmigration theory underlies the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body. They say that this does not imply the re-assembling of the material particles of the body, but the transmigration of the spirit into a new phase of being. Tertullian is alleged to be an adherent of the doctrine, and, when the theory was frowned upon by the orthodox leaders of the Church, it is said to have been preserved in many of the mediæval heretical sects. Finally, it may be urged that there are traces of it in all modern poets and philosophers of any consequence, notably in Wordsworth, who sang of our birth as "but a sleep and a forgetting."<sup>1</sup>

According to the view taken of it by theosophy, transmigration is slightly different from metempsychosis. The soul in changing its abode does not have to descend below the human level; man runs no risk of becoming a beast of burden in any literal sense or of

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy and the Theosophical Society*, p. 68ff.

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descending even lower in the scale of being. But as regards human destiny theosophy is definitely committed to this doctrine with its apparent hope and its actual despair. We may admit the hopefulness of the theory because of its plausible explanation of the inequalities of human life. Mrs. Besant lays considerable stress upon this service which the transmigration theory may render amidst the perplexing problems of existence. "Go back as far as we may in historic records and we may find lofty intelligence and debased ignorance side by side, and the occult records, carrying us backwards, tell a similar story of the early millennia of humanity. Nor should this distress us, as though some had been unduly favoured and others unduly hindered for the struggle of life. The loftiest soul had its childhood and infancy albeit in previous worlds, when other souls were as high above it as others are below it now ; the lowest soul shall yet climb to where our highest are standing, and souls yet unborn shall occupy its present place in evolution. Things seem unjust because we wrench our world out of its place in evolution, and set it apart in isolation, with no forerunner and no successor. It is



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our ignorance that sees the injustice ; the ways of Nature are equal, and she brings to all her children infancy, childhood and manhood. Not hers the fault if our folly demands that all souls shall occupy the same stages of evolution at the same time, and cries 'Unjust' if the demand be not fulfilled."<sup>1</sup> And yet we cannot find a satisfactory solution of present inequalities merely in a reference to the past. The inequalities of "previous worlds" do not explain the discrepancies of this one, unless two conditions are fulfilled. We must establish a clearer continuity between our present world and its fore-runners, otherwise our backward reference is illegitimate ; and, even if continuity can be established, we must furnish an explanation of the inequalities in the "previous world", otherwise we have simply pushed the problem further back. Theosophists have not improved upon other transmigratonists in fulfilling satisfactorily these two conditions.

There is at first sight almost an element of hopefulness in the appeal which is made to a sense of justice which will enable us to bear with patience suffering which can be shown to be the

<sup>1</sup> *Ancient Wisdom*, p. 159.

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result of sin. The mystery of suffering is lightened if we can trace the working of the law that, as we sow, so shall we reap. It is suggested that, if our sufferings cannot be explained by the sins of this present life, they may be traced back to a previous life. But the slightness of the continuity between the various lives creates in this connection a new sense of injustice. Theosophy undervalues the importance of the conscious continuity of personality, and on deeper reflection our souls revolt against the idea of receiving punishment for sins which we do not *know* that *we* have committed. This difficulty is minimised to some extent by the contention—not very well established—that some highly developed souls have memories of their past lives. But this would not be claimed for the vast majority. In general the only solution suggested is that our past experiences and actions find their continuity in the form of faculties. Our misery in this present life will thus be explained by the weakness of the faculties which we have inherited from our past. This, however, introduces us to new difficulties. Weakness of faculties shows itself in the making of mistakes rather than in the

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commission of sins, and it is doubtful whether we are any more willing to accept with equanimity the results of our mistakes if these are inevitable and we cannot be held responsible for them within the limits of our present life. But a more serious consequence lies in the diminution of moral earnestness which arises from the blurring of the distinction between mistakes and sins. Under this theory and within the limits of our present life we shall be encouraged to connect our sufferings with our mistakes rather than with our sins, and we shall not be so greatly perturbed by the fact that our very power of making mistakes is traced back to our sinfulness in a shadowy previous life. Thus a lightness of moral tone will result from the very doctrine which was supposed to add so enormously to the seriousness of the moral life and to deepen our consciousness of the inevitability of suffering as the result of sin. Further, there is much suffering in our present life which we cannot trace even to our mistakes, and no explanation is offered which may lighten the weight of this additional burden of misery.

This transmigration theory offers us over and over again "another chance" and might thus

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seem to be full of comfort. But the vastness of the time we have at our disposal lessens our sense of the necessity of effort. If we have plenty of time, why should we distress ourselves by moral activity, and why should we seek to assist others towards what will be for them also an inevitable attainment? Without effort and service on our part, however, a mood of fatalism and depression will settle upon us.

The transmigration doctrine also produces within us a feeling of loneliness. Everything is related to the development of the lonely soul of the individual. There is no security that we shall meet those whom we love or return to earth along with those who have been of our company. Separated from one another we pass through the worlds, and, for all that we consciously know, we begin our lives again in the company of strangers. Surely it would be more comforting if we could believe that we pass onwards and upwards from stage to stage in the company with those with whom on earth we have entered into bonds of love and friendship.

Finally, there is no sufficient reason given for a return to earth at all. We may admit most

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readily the need for development and may agree that the account of our life is not finally closed when we leave our mortal bodies. But could not this development take place in other worlds, in other phases of being ? Why should we cling so desperately to the idea that earth is the only possible training ground. When we have passed out of one class at school we certainly carry defects with us, but these defects are remedied in the higher classes. Why should there not be higher worlds than this to which in company with our fellows we pass as continuously conscious personalities and receive throughout the ages the training which shall bring us into closer relation with God.

And why should we apply so strictly the idea of gradual development ? May the grace of God not bring about new beginnings in regard to which we should not presume to prescribe a date for the commencement or determine the period of their continuing influence. Mrs. Besant does not indeed rule out the operation of the grace of God or deny the possibility of conversion. But she tends to regard the latter as only an exception to a rule : " A habit made

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by many wrong desires cannot be destroyed by one effort of right desire, except in those rare cases in which the God within awakes, and with one touch of the fiery spiritual will burns up the chains. Such cases of 'conversion' are on record, but most men tread a longer path."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the "God within" may awake more frequently and work more rapidly than we are inclined to admit when we are too much obsessed by the idea of gradual development. It is possible that in the higher worlds, if not even in this one, the grace of God may operate more freely than is allowed by the inexorable law of *karma*, which demands that suffering shall always be viewed as punishment and as in exact proportion to sin, and which forgets that purification by suffering may have its different degrees in the lives of different individuals. After all, the ultimate purpose of God is restoration and not punishment. Humanity is under grace as well as under law.

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy*, p. 66.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Relation of Theosophy to Science, Philosophy and Religion

ONE of the main sources of the popularity of theosophy, in addition to the stimulus which it seems to give to social service, and in addition also to the appeal which it makes at least in India to patriotic pride, has been discovered to be the encouragement which it appears to offer to the spirit of scientific inquiry. It will have nothing to do with blind faith, and its ambition is to maintain a rigorously scientific attitude. The student of theosophy, according to Mr. Leadbeater, "either knows a thing or suspends his judgment about it."<sup>1</sup> In seeking to "discover a view of life which will answer the greatest number of questions"<sup>2</sup> he takes nothing on trust. He may frequently have to defer to authority—most theosophists, as we have seen, emphasise this necessity of an

<sup>1</sup> *Textbook of Theosophy*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Cousins, *Bases of Theosophy*, p. 7.

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appeal to authority—but in such cases he will claim that he believes, not because he is in the habit of believing, but because he is assured that the authority is trustworthy. The fundamental contention is that tradition and custom must never be taken as adequate bases of truth. The fetters of ancient dogmatism must be broken through in order that the spirit may be free to rejoice in the “glory of the lighted mind.”

Theosophy hopes to discover clear and definite laws of the phenomena with which it deals. Mr. Sinnett urges that the development of latent psychological faculties “enables the occultist to obtain actual experimental knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> and he professes his desire “to record with exactitude the experimental proofs he has obtained.”<sup>2</sup> On behalf of Madame Blavatsky it is claimed that she anticipated many of the conclusions of modern science, and that “she prophesied of scientific discoveries twenty years before they were made.”<sup>3</sup> It is the ambition of theosophists

<sup>1</sup> *Occult World*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Theosophy and the Theosophical Society*, p. 41.



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generally to make provision for a science which, in the words of Col. Olcott, should be "a far wider, higher, nobler science than that of modern scientists."<sup>1</sup> Without doubt, theosophy claims to be a science, and to a certain extent it may justifiably pride itself upon its faithfulness to the scientific ideal.

It may perhaps be noted that in many of its healthier phases the aims of theosophy are similar to those of the Society of Psychical Research. This Society organises inquiry into certain phenomena which are "apparently inexplicable by known laws of nature," but of which the laws may nevertheless be discovered. A suggestive comparison may also be made between theosophy and the purpose which the late F. W. H. Myers set before himself in his well-known book. His endeavour was to show that "realms left so far to philosophy and religion—too often to mere superstition and idle dreams—might in the end be brought under steady scientific rule."<sup>2</sup>

Theosophy also lays great stress on that pure disinterested love of truth and freedom from

<sup>1</sup> *Addresses*, p. 83.

<sup>2</sup> *Human Personality*, Introduction, p. 7.

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passion and prejudice which we associate with much modern scientific inquiry. An appeal is made to men that they should be ready for new beginnings. Madame Blavatsky puts this in her usual emphatic manner: "One single thought about the past that thou hast left behind thee, will drag thee down."<sup>1</sup> And the theosophical aspirant must carry on his search for truth with that purity of heart which is associated with the quest for the Holy Grail. Love and truth are the constituents of his ideal, and love is based upon truth. Scientific inquiry, if conducted in a proper manner, will also have a beneficial reaction upon those who engage in it. It will increase the store of spiritual energy at their disposal, which energy, according to theosophical belief, will have far-reaching cosmical effects.<sup>2</sup>

The catholicity which theosophists profess and which they express in their devotion to the study of Comparative Religion, may also be taken to be a manifestation of the scientific spirit. They abhor the narrow dogmatism of the adherents of particular religions, and they

<sup>1</sup> *Voice of the Silence*, p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sinnett, *Occult World*, p. 130.

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disapprove especially of the vehemence of the older apologists for Christianity. They desire to make their own the principle of Molière, "I seek the good wherever I may find it." Religious experience implies variety, and they claim that this variety can be sufficiently provided for, only if religious doctrines be drawn from many sources and the accepted truth firmly based upon comparison. Without variety souls of different degrees of attainment cannot be satisfied. "If there be but one teaching a large number of those to whom it is addressed will entirely escape its influence."<sup>1</sup> The range of our investigations must therefore be increased to the greatest possible extent.

Notwithstanding its professions, however, and its actual, though limited, performance, theosophy shows a disinclination to adopt the exact methods of physical science, and it does this both justifiably and unjustifiably. It is in healthy agreement with that reaction against the exclusive dominance of mathematical and physical categories and sciences which has been so marked a feature of recent philosophy. To a very considerable extent nineteenth century

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 12.

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thought was under the influence of a one-sided interpretation of Kant. He had confined knowledge to phenomena, but when he so confined it he was thinking mainly of knowledge of a mathematical and physical character. Though in his practical philosophy he had shown the possibility of another kind of apprehension of the realities behind phenomena, it was—as has been so well shown by Prof. Pringle-Pattison—the negative aspect of his philosophy which attracted most attention. The deduction was drawn that only knowledge belonging to the lower planes of science was worthy to be called knowledge, or science, in the truest sense of the term. In consequence of this concentration of attention upon physical categories, materialism became rampant, and, quite unwarrantably, pressed into its service the seemingly all-pervasive conception of evolution. When speculation was thus restricted, it could not lead to satisfying results, and as Mrs. Besant puts it, “Agnosticism” grew and flourished; what could man know beyond what his senses could discover, beyond what his intellect could grasp? Such was the condition of educated thought in the

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last quarter of the nineteenth century. The younger generation can scarcely realise that veritable eclipse of faith.”<sup>1</sup>

Theosophy appeals to those who are at this stage of revolt from materialism and who feel that they have been led by it into a dreary desert of unbelief. They have discovered that a merely naturalistic science leaves vast regions of being unexplained, and that the great things of life are beyond the grasp of the merely mathematical or logical understanding which depends on rigid demonstration and the exceedingly careful marshalling of evidence. Theosophy adopts an entirely critical attitude to the pretensions of narrow naturalism, and is concomitantly in revolt against the view of man as merely a reasoning, self-sufficient being. Though there is a vast difference between Madame Blavatsky and Prof. James Ward in regard to their philosophical equipment and powers of analysis, yet there is a curious similarity in the doctrines of the scientists which they select for attack. Madame Blavatsky, e.g., points out, as does Prof. Ward, that the atoms of the scientist and other

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy*, p. 14.

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physical postulates are mere abstractions,<sup>1</sup> and the following criticism of natural selection is quite in accordance with many tendencies of modern thought; "Natural Selection as a *power* is in reality a pure myth, especially when resorted to as an explanation of the origin of species. It is merely a representative term expressive of the manner in which useful variations are stereotyped when produced. Of itself it can produce nothing and only operates on the rough material presented to it. The real question at issue is, what *Cause* produces the variations in the organisms themselves."<sup>2</sup> Even while we cannot agree with Madame Blavatsky's sweeping denunciations of scientific theories as the "unhealthy will o' the wisps of materialistic imaginations"<sup>3</sup> we may sympathise with her desire for positive rather than negative results. We may also approve of the general theosophical tendency to lay great emphasis upon the spiritual character of reality. Theosophists hold that while man has a body, he is a spirit, and that the spirit is dominant. Mr. Leadbeater, e.g., repeatedly

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Secret Doctrine*, p. 510, and *Naturalism and Agnosticism*, passim.

<sup>2</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 648.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 451.

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recurs to the idea of thought as the creator of forms,<sup>1</sup> and Mrs. Besant's general reflection upon theosophical doctrines is also of importance in this connection, as indicating an almost excessive rebound from the materialistic point of view. "Few of its doctrines are more important in their ethical bearing than this of the creation and direction of thought forms, or artificial elementals, for through it man learns that his mind does not concern himself alone, but that he is ever sending out angels and devils into the world of men for whose creation he is responsible, and for whose influence he is held accountable."<sup>2</sup> It is to be noticed, however, that with theosophists the reaction from materialism does not extend to a denial of the material world such as we find to be the negative consequence of the abstract idealism of Indian philosophy and certain modern pseudo-scientific theories. Objectively the theosophists tend rather in the direction of a pan-psychic pluralism, emphasising the universal interpenetration of spirit and matter. They hold that "everything in the universe,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Textbook of Theosophy*, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ancient Wisdom*, p. 63.

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throughout all its kingdoms is conscious," and they add: "We must remember that, because we do not perceive any sign of consciousness, we have no right to deny that any consciousness exists there. There is no such thing as dead or blind matter."<sup>1</sup> Whether the theosophists have escaped all the difficulties of pan-psychism is another matter, and may require further discussion; but their appreciation of the reality of the spiritual is unmistakable, and they have undoubtedly helped to deliver us from a narrow system of natural law. They have opened our eyes to the consideration that natural science in the ordinary sense of the term can deal only with the outer aspects of matter, and they have encouraged us to explore its inner possibilities. Subjectively, theosophists lay emphasis upon that aspect of intuition with which Bergson has made us familiar, and in support of which, provided it can be freed from anti-intellectualism and emotionalism, there is so much to be said. It is by ceasing to be merely static, calculating and mechanical, and by throwing ourselves into the current of life, that we may discover something

<sup>1</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 273.



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of the mystery of being and appreciate the significance of those realms of the spirit where our highest religious and ethical values find their recognition and their home. Mere science can give us only dead matter, and we demand a universe that is both spiritual and alive.

It may be questioned, however, whether there is not also an unjustifiable side of this revolt of theosophy from science. Do theosophists appeal simply from a narrow to a wider conception of science? —in which case we should altogether approve of their procedure. Or is their revolt nothing more than a reaction which would substitute emotionalism and imagination for science and, not infrequently, relapse into dogmatism?

We have already noticed (p. 27 ff.) a certain conflict between a desire for free scientific inquiry and a spirit of reliance on authority. The power of penetration into the secrets of the supersensible world, and even the ability to handle correctly the historical material necessary for the study of comparative religion, is regarded as dependent upon the possession and cultivation of occult powers. It is at the same

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time admitted that all do not possess these powers and that even those who do, have not had sufficient opportunity for cultivating them. Consequently, those who are ignorant or insufficiently equipped must rely upon the testimony of those who *know*, or, in other words, upon the authority of the theosophical Masters or Adepts, and ultimately upon the members of the Great White Brotherhood. It is indicated that knowledge *follows* faith in these teachers and does not precede it.<sup>1</sup>

It may be said, of course, that this is just what we find in connection with all scientific inquiry; we cannot all work out results for ourselves and we have to accept much of our scientific information on the authority of experts in their particular subject. There is, however, a considerable difference between the authority claimed by the theosophists and that which is rightly exercised by scientific experts. The results obtained by the latter are offered freely for examination, and every step even in the reasoning may be investigated. Through the exercise of their ordinary intelligence, others may follow the scientist along

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Taylor, *Essays on Theosophy*, p. 61.

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the path to his conclusions, and the new knowledge which they thus gain may be regarded as a natural extension of knowledge already obtained. On the other hand, the theosophical expert may indeed tell his pupils that, *if* they will put themselves under the guidance of an initiate, they may verify the occult truths for themselves. But in the meantime the material is available only for the occultist, and the steps by which the initiation may be accomplished and the knowledge gained are not fully set forth. Even at the beginning sufficient freedom of intellectual approach is hardly allowed, and there is a tendency to suggest that any disagreement with theosophy is due to mental laziness or obtuseness. And, as the candidate for initiation proceeds in his quest, he passes, as it were, through a door which is immediately closed behind him. Along what tortuous passages he may be led we know not. He may come back bearing a revelation of precious truth, but how he reached that truth he is not permitted to tell—except to other initiates who have already surrendered themselves absolutely to the guidance of a teacher and thus passed within the privileged

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esoteric circle. In view of all this we feel inclined to demand that the theosophists should put their cards upon the table if they wish to establish their claim to truly scientific procedure. Yet we find Madame Blavatsky saying of her own book, "This work withholds far more than it gives out."<sup>1</sup> Further, it may surely be contended, in connection with a discipline which professes the universality of philosophy or religion, that a firmer distinction should be made between the possession of genius and the ordinary exercise of the understanding. The occult power by which alone theosophic truth may be attained bears a close resemblance to the former rather than to the latter. Now we may appreciate most highly the attainments of scientific genius, and freely recognise that apart from these science would have made but little progress. In special connection with the subject matter of theosophy we may recognise also that only certain people are fitted by nature for appreciation of the supernatural. As F. W. H. Myers puts it : "We must not assume as a matter of course that the subliminal region of any one of us

<sup>1</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 276.

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possesses that particular sensitivity—that specific transparency—which can receive and register definite facts from the unseen. *That* may be a gift which stands as much alone in the subliminal regions as, say, a perfect musical ear in the supra-liminal.”<sup>x</sup> This consideration suggests very clearly one of the chief difficulties in the way of crediting theosophy with a genuinely scientific attitude, especially such a scientific attitude as is requisite, not only for a special branch of knowledge, but for the philosophico-religious view of the world. We are not all geniuses, neither do we all possess that peculiar sensitiveness to which Myers refers and which many theosophists would regard as indispensable, but we all desire to obtain a religious view of the world which shall be more or less philosophically satisfactory. In view of the promise of theosophy to satisfy our desire in this respect we should all desire to become theosophists. Yet we shall remain unsatisfied so long as theosophical success is dependent on the possession of peculiar genius or capacity for supernormal investigation.

It may indeed be pointed out that

<sup>x</sup> *Human Personality*, p. 33.

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theosophists sometimes attempt to meet the aspirations of the ordinary man by telling us that we all possess these faculties, but have forgotten them or the method of their use and therefore disbelieve in them. An argument from forgetfulness, however, is hardly sufficient proof of existence.

Unless the road to theosophical attainment is made plainer for the ordinary man, and unless its experts are more willing to be frank with those who are possessed of only ordinary intelligence, there is a danger that a disastrous opposition will grow up between science and theosophy. Authority will come into conflict with reason, and an esoteric school will adopt a superior attitude regarding the knowledge which they claim to possess. They will protest that the results of their investigations should be exempt from ordinary criticism, and such a dogmatic attitude will have a deleterious effect upon the results themselves. Certain evidences show that this apprehension is not altogether without foundation. There seems to be a feeling in theosophical circles that devotion to their own methods involves an entire abandonment of the methods of

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science instead of being an extension of the latter. It is alleged that it is only by denying the validity of science that scientific difficulties can be properly met and the methods of theosophy have free operation. If theosophy takes the help of science, it will accomplish its own destruction ; therefore, the safer course is for theosophy to pour contempt on science. It should be careful, indeed, not to give up its claim to be a science, but it should so frame this claim as to make it appear that theosophy is a science of such elevation that it is altogether outside the class to which ordinary science belongs, and that the latter has no title to the name of science at all. In accordance with this tendency we find Mr. Sinnett, e.g., telling us that precise rules such as we are accustomed to in science, "are quite contrary to the rules of occultism."<sup>1</sup> and he makes Koot Hoomi, the "Master" of Madame Blavatsky, say, "You do not seem to realise the tremendous difficulties in the way of imparting even the rudiments of our science to those who have been trained in the familiar methods of yours. You do not see that the more you have of the one

<sup>1</sup> *Occult World*, p. 53.

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the less capable you are of intuitively comprehending the other.”<sup>1</sup> In much the same spirit of exclusiveness Madame Blavatsky says: “The key to this cannot be given, for herein lies the mystery of esoteric calculation, and for the purpose of ordinary calculation it has no sense.”<sup>2</sup>

In close connection with this theory of the mutual exclusiveness of the spheres of theosophy and ordinary science we find the idea that it is illegitimate to communicate the higher knowledge of theosophy to any but a chosen few belonging to an esoteric circle. Some theosophists consider that it is utterly useless to make any such attempt, and tell us that we might as well discuss colours with a man who has been born blind. Others are reticent out of carefulness for their own reputation. Jacolliot, e.g., says, “We have seen things such as one does not describe for fear of making his readers doubt his intelligence, but still we have seen them.”<sup>3</sup> Others again are filled with apprehension of danger to the recipients of the mysterious knowledge. Madame Blavatsky tells us that

<sup>1</sup> *op. cit.* p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Sinnett, *Occult World*, p. 11.



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“to impart to the unprepared multitude secrets of such tremendous importance would be equivalent to giving a child a lighted candle in a powder magazine.”<sup>1</sup> Most theosophists, however, take refuge in a plain prohibition: it is forbidden to communicate these truths and that is enough for them. “They do not state plainly what they know, in case they should be asked how they know it. And they could not answer this without disclosing secrets, or without promising supernatural assurances which they would not always have at hand for each reader.”<sup>2</sup> They must not even hint that they have a secret lest inadvertently they should betray something of its contents.

This veil of secrecy with which theosophists conceal their teachings may furnish an element of attractiveness for certain minds and may give at least to the initiates something of that profound satisfaction which is associated with membership of a privileged class. It cannot, however, establish confidence in the scientific or philosophical validity of the conclusions arrived at. When men are invited to accept doctrines on authority, they are always apt to

<sup>1</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

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investigate the basis of that authority, and when they are further told that the foundations cannot be revealed, they may even have the presumption to hint that there are no foundations at all. It is undoubtedly true that there must always be a great reserve in connection with the deepest truths of life, but that reserve must always be organic to experience. It is dangerous to treat it as the exclusive possession of a privileged class. When the truths promulgated have to depend on the artificial aid of secrecy and similar devices, this simply means that the defenders of these truths have not thought through to a philosophical position ; they have failed to bring their truths into relation with the universe as a whole. They base the validity of these truths upon their source in a mysterious faculty rather than upon their meaning as revealed by the operation of reason. There is a danger also that miserliness may go along with concealment, and that the truths obtained may be regarded as a special hoard to be doled out according to the good pleasure of the recipients rather than as the common possession of humanity in which all have a right to share.

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Theosophists may be justifiably disappointed with the results of mechanical science, but in their revolt they have not carried their speculations far enough. They have become conscious of the Unknown, but have allowed it to remain unknown as far as clear thinking about it is concerned. They are aware of the whole of things, but have sought to express that whole merely as an abstract unity, instead of in its concrete completeness. And, seeing that thought in dealing with abstractions has attempted an impossible task, and has consequently met with little success, discouragement has led to the emotionalising of thought or its transformation into a mysterious faculty akin to imagination. The Unknown has remained unconquered by thought and has consequently become a region which may be peopled by imaginative creations—in other words the Unknown has become the supernatural. Not having sufficient intellectual salt in themselves or power to think through to genuinely philosophical conclusions, theosophists have enveloped themselves in a mystical haze, and, when abstractions have failed to satisfy them, they have supplied the deficiency either by

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borrowing from the past or by a free exercise of imagination.

As regards its borrowing from the past, we have seen that theosophy levies contributions from all religions and affixes to them its own labels. In general, its indebtedness to other sources is so great that there is a considerable amount of truth in the somewhat harsh judgment which Miss Lily Dougall passes upon the system: "In its illumination I can find no ideal that has not long been current. The very phrases and notions seem to come straight from oriental or neo-platonic literature, and from modern, but not the latest, philosophy and science."<sup>1</sup> Theosophy inculcates a great reverence for the past, but its reverence is not altogether scientific. Mrs. Besant's attitude to history, e.g., is dangerous from the point of view of accuracy: "It is not alleged," she says "that the events recorded did not take place, but only their physical happening was a matter of minor importance."<sup>2</sup> But if facts are regarded as merely of minor importance, this means that theosophy may take from the past only what suits the views of authoritative

<sup>1</sup> *Immortality*, p. 333.

<sup>2</sup> *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 53.

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adepts and that free play will be given to imagination. It is for this reason that the study of Comparative Religion, which in itself is so valuable, becomes in theosophical hands somewhat barren of results. They might be described as specialists in the study of oriental religions, but there is a good deal of truth in the remark of an authority like Dr. Farquhar that "theosophy has made no contribution whatsoever to our knowledge of oriental religions,"<sup>1</sup> and his more general reference to the "cosmological and historical rubbish" which fills the pages of theosophical books is also not without justification.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, theosophists seem to allow imagination to dominate not only their interpretation of the past but also their philosophical construction. We must of course remember that there is a true use of imagination. As Eucken says, "hearts have never been won and minds have never been swayed without the presence of a regal imagination which understands how to win visible forms from an unseen world and to penetrate through all the multiplicity of things into the kingdom of a

<sup>1</sup> *Modern Religious Movements in India*, p. 233.

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 289.

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fuller life.”<sup>1</sup> We may give full credit to theosophists for their appreciation of the place of imagination, but our criticism is that they have not realised that imagination can be truly used only if it is kept in close alliance with thought instead of being substituted for thought. They have been in too great a hurry to fill in the details of the unseen world. They have rightly refused to remain satisfied with ignorance, but they have filled the void with the creations of their fancy. They have forgotten the law of parsimony which rules over genuinely scientific procedure and which forbids us to multiply explanatory powers and forces at our own sweet will. If we are confronted with a difficulty on the physical plane, we are not justified in simply imagining another being on another plane and asserting that this being can remove our difficulty. This procedure involves merely a repetition of the problem, and its artificiality gives rise to additional difficulties. We find that the realm of imaginary entities itself requires explanation and that the place of explanation cannot be taken by assertion. No doubt there is attractiveness

<sup>1</sup> *Truth of Life*, p. 8.

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in the ability to say anything at all about another world, and no doubt it is comfortable to feel that we have at our disposal a plentiful supply of imaginary entities, but our knowledge is not really increased by this procedure. If indeed we can take the first step towards belief in these creations, the rest may be easy, but theosophy does not supply us with any undogmatic justification for this first step. It revolts from dogmatism, but it again comes back to dogmatism.

It might be said also that its revolt from materialism does not carry it very far, and that it is soon found in dangerous proximity to its starting point. It does not rise from the physical to the metaphysical level. It applies merely empirical methods to the unknown. It remains dogmatic because, while it accepts the data as given and yet cannot pretend that they have the direct authority of ordinary sense perception, it does not work through to the higher authority of rational justification. The imaginary beings are not seized upon by thought and worked up into a system which can be based upon philosophical foundations. The situation is similar to that of the mere mystic

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according to Prof. A. E. Taylor: "The mere mystic reverts to the lower order of immediacy upon which intellectual reflection has not done its work, instead of pressing on to the higher in which the effect of that work is preserved though its form is transcended."<sup>1</sup> The explanatory entities remain on the sense level, and the system which includes them has therefore more affinity with magic than with developed mysticism, philosophy and religion; for it has been rightly said that "nothing more inhibits true faith than the superstition that peoples the unseen with romantic beings for whose existence there is no shred of real evidence." We are left with the impression that theosophy is in rebellion against calm thought upon nature and her laws, and that for this reason it takes refuge in the occult. It reaches a specious completeness of explanation which is unconvincing for the philosophic mind. One recent writer puts the matter vigorously, but perhaps not too vigorously, when he speaks of the "accursed fallacy of explanation which riddles theosophy through and through like a sieve, and leaves nothing

<sup>1</sup> *Metaphysics*, p. 152.



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behind but a monstrous vacuum posing as a plenary revelation.”<sup>1</sup> It may be noticed also that this craving for details is slightly inconsistent with the central claim made by theosophy to a direct knowledge of God, for such direct knowledge by no means inevitably demands a circumstantial account of another world.

It might conceivably be argued that theosophy incurs the danger which is common to all cosmologies which proceed with their construction of the world from the assumption of an Absolute of an abstract character. If the ultimate reality is characterless, then the attempt to attach predicates to it, means that we have already descended to a lower level. The conception of personality, e.g., will not be regarded as ultimate. It cannot be used as a description of the deepest reality, and for the individual it will appear as a limitation which must be left behind. The theosophist inevitably feels that he is baffled in his attempt to think through to the Absolute. Consequently he relinquishes the activity of thought

<sup>1</sup> Orde Ward, “Judgment of the Cross,” *London Quarterly Review*, 1919.

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and passes over to the opposite extreme—to the attempt to construct the details of the unseen world by an effort of imagination. The higher powers of his nature fail to bring him into touch with the Absolute, and he finds himself compelled to depend upon the lower. He thus remains upon the sensible level even when dealing with the super-sensible world.

In this way we may understand the close affinity which theosophy has with *magic* and kindred presentations of existence. The foundation ideas of magic, as of theosophy, are that there are other spheres of being beyond the sensible, and that it is possible for human beings to gain access to these spheres. Its main motive is a somewhat unbalanced curiosity and its desire to satisfy this curiosity is not wholly scientific and disinterested. The magician has always a secret hope that by the exercise of his will in the transcendental sphere he may obtain for himself certain definite advantages. He may share with the mystic a belief in the spiritual, but he stops short too soon in his search for ultimate reality. He is content with the details of the intermediate stage. He strives to satisfy himself with the

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symbols and manipulates them, caring insufficiently for the reality of which they are the symbol. Magic claims to have entered into the inheritance of the science of the Magi, but there is this difference, that of the Magi it might be said, in Miss Underhill's beautiful words, that their "quest of the symbolic Blazing Star brought them once at least to the cradle of the Incarnate God,"<sup>1</sup> whereas magic remains predominantly self-centred.

Magic might be described as a claim to the possession of secret powers of control over nature through familiarity with the forces of the invisible world, emphasis being laid upon the concentration of these powers in a privileged class or individual. The powers are used primarily for the benefit of the favoured class or individual, though the results may be made available for other members of the community if sufficient inducement offer. It must be remembered, however, that there are various kinds of magic, such as white and black magic, and that selfish exclusiveness is more a characteristic of the latter than of the former. While the "white" magician may be said to

<sup>1</sup> *Mysticism* p. 184.

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strive for power for the sake of humanity, it is admitted that the "black" is decidedly unsocial and may use his power against the world. Moreover, his concern is not so much with the beneficent as with the maleficent amongst the secret beings with whom he claims familiarity.

Now in studying the antecedents of theosophy we have found that it has served itself heir to a tradition of mystery. In the Yoga practices of India and in less reputable superstitious practices of that land, in the mystery religions of the ancient world in Asia Minor, Greece, Rome and Egypt, in the secrets of the Cabbala, in the initiatory rites of the Masons and the Templars and other secret or semi-secret societies of the Middle Ages, it has found many affinities. But in its inheritance theosophy has not always selected the best elements. It has borne acceptable testimony to the sense of mystery engendered by the consciousness of the All, but it has been too ready to relieve that sense of mystery by attention to comparatively unimportant details. It was said of Eliphas Levi that "in the hard-earned acquirement of power over the Many, he tends to forget the One"; and the tendency is manifest

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amongst theosophists. It has placed the satisfaction of curiosity about the unseen world on a higher plane than the moral contribution to the betterment of the world as a whole, and it has emphasised the cultivation of subjective faculty more than the appreciation of objective reality. And so it has in many cases led nowhere but into the dangerous realms of magic—the better kind of magic, it must be admitted, rather than the worse.

There are many evidences of the actual and close connection between theosophy and magic. Mr. Jinarajadasa, e.g., states that theosophy “accepts ritualistic mysticism as one mode of discovery of the great reality,”<sup>1</sup> and he describes sympathetically the scrupulous care with which the ritualist will endeavour to conduct his ceremonial: “Every act in the series must be performed, and if one is omitted the mystic magic will not create the necessary force. Knowledge has little to do with magic; . . . any one who is taught the ritual can perform the magic.”<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Besant also tells us, in reference to the use of *mantras*, that the efficiency lies in the rhythm of the sounds.

<sup>1</sup> *The Nature of Mysticism*, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 60.

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The *mantras* cannot be translated, yet they are more valuable even than beautiful poetry with meaning.<sup>1</sup> There is a bearing upon this topic also in what Mr. Leadbeater has to say about the control of "elementals" on the astral plane. By a definite and long continued outgoing of thought a man may create "an artificial elemental of immense power and resourcefulness for its own particular object, and accumulate within it a store of force which would enable it to carry out his wishes for an indefinite period." And he adds: "An elemental is a perfect storage-battery."<sup>2</sup> This externalising of the power of thought, even though it may be a testimony to the control of mind over matter and so far acceptable, is, when accompanied by belief in occult faculty and unaccompanied by any philosophical theory as to the place of mind in the universe, little better than the expression of a magical tendency. We are supported in this judgment by the discovery that some of these elemental beings may occasionally get beyond the control of their creators and work untold harm,<sup>3</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Introduction to Yoga*, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> *The Astral Plane*, p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 101.

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also when we read such prohibitions as the following : " This is a secret which gives death ; close thy mouth lest thou shouldst reveal it to the vulgar."<sup>1</sup>

Other illustrations of the disposition of theosophy towards magic may be found in the idea of an *akashic* fluid as the medium of occult power, and also in the belief in etheric records. Such records are believed to exist on the walls of ancient buildings and monuments, and by means of them those who possess the requisite power may read secrets of the past which are hidden from the ordinary man. It is not only the secrets of the past which are revealed to the theosophical magician. In regard also to current events many lay claim to an uncanny power of tapping sources of information which the individuals concerned fondly imagine are their private property. As a consideration bearing on this whole topic we may note in conclusion that in the list of publications of the Theosophical Publishing House,

<sup>1</sup> Madame Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, p. 299. Cf. also Mrs. Besant, " If this knowledge were published to the world, it might and would be misused, just as the knowledge of subtle poisons was misused in the Middle Ages by the Borgias and others. It would pass into the hands of people of strong intellect but of unregulated desires, men moved by separative instincts, seeking the gain of their separate selves and careless of the common good."—*Esoteric Christianity*, p. 14.

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Adyar, works dealing with magical practices occupy a very large place.

If these powers which are claimed by theosophists, were simply pioneer efforts to penetrate the mysteries of the super-sensible world, we should more readily welcome them, just as we welcome the activities of the Society for Psychical Research or similar efforts to get rid of the thralldom of materialism and assert the reality of the spiritual. But when these theosophic powers are associated with esotericism, privilege and secrecy, the assertion of the claim to them becomes harmful. It inevitably connects the claimants with the necromancy and wizardry of earlier ages, and tends to break down the distinction between "black" and "white" magic. Moreover, the assertion of such powers may very easily become an instrument for the assertion of a somewhat tyrannical authority over the weaker members of the theosophical community.

In regard to the characteristics we have just been considering, theosophy shows a certain connection with modern spiritualism. There is agreement in their common revolt from materialism and their recognition of the



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supersensible. From spiritualism theosophy might derive much evidence for the existence of spheres beyond the sensible, and win corroboration for many of its speculations regarding the astral plane. Like spiritualism, theosophy is fully alive to the possibilities of auto-suggestion and telepathy, and would quote with approval the lines of Shakespeare :

“ If the dull substance of my flesh was thought  
Injurious distance would not stop the way.”

But theosophy is more elevated in its conceptions and wider in its range than spiritualism. The latter has been not unjustifiably described as a “ bourgeois gospel,”<sup>1</sup> strangely satisfied with utterly commonplace messages from the unseen. Theosophy, on the other hand, has greater resources at its disposal and is not so narrowly interested in messages from the recently departed. Mr. Sinnett indeed goes so far as to say in reference to occultism—by which he means the occultism of theosophy : “ Occultism has nothing to do with spiritualism. All the phenomena of spiritualism can be produced by occultists familiar with the resources of nature.”<sup>2</sup> It is hardly possible, however,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. E. Waite, *Studies in Mysticism*, p. 162.    <sup>2</sup> *Occult World*, p. 14.

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to follow Mr. Sinnett in his denial of a general affinity.

While we are dealing with the subject of collateral relations, we may notice that there is also a connection between theosophy and Christian Science. Here, again, there is agreement in their common revolt from materialism and their assertion of the spiritual. We have seen how theosophy is greatly indebted to the metaphysical speculation of India, and in its philosophical attitude Christian Science might be described as a somewhat poverty-stricken reproduction of the Indian Vedānta. By its adherence to another Indian philosophy, viz., the Sāṅkhya, theosophy is prevented from drawing out the full consequences of the Vedānta presuppositions and finding itself shut up to a denial of matter. Christian Science, however, relies much upon this denial, and in its practical applications it is the *denial* of pain and sickness which is one of its main teachings. On the other hand, theosophy professes to *ignore* these disturbing elements in human life, and its attitude is well expressed by Mrs. Besant: "Try if you have the strength of mind . . . to turn away your

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mind from the pain and leave the body alone to suffer ; and you will find that a greater part of the pain has vanished, because the mind is no longer magnifying it and giving to it its own intensity of memory and of fear.”<sup>1</sup>

Further, the motives of theosophy are on the whole more spiritual than those of Christian Science. The latter lays too much emphasis upon the possession of bodily health, and, in the application of its philosophical principles, is inclined to suggest that we should cultivate spiritual health for the sake of bodily vigour. There is, consequently, a certain amount of justification in the criticism passed by Miss Lilian Edger, that “to develop the inner self *for the sake of bodily health* seems something like calling down fire from heaven to boil the kettle, instead of gathering sticks together and lighting a fire in the ordinary way ; and one cannot help wishing that so noble and inspiring an attitude of mind had been called forth by a worthier motive.”<sup>2</sup> Whatever criticism may be passed upon theosophists themselves, they certainly cannot be accused of being

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy and the Theosophical Society*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 152.

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too much occupied with *ordinary* physical existence.

To return from this digression to the consideration of the magical tendencies of theosophy—we may note that these manifest themselves through a slightly conservative attitude. One Hindu is stated to have given utterance to the opinion that theosophy had “put back India half a century,”<sup>1</sup> and it is certainly true that theosophy has encouraged the retention from the past of superstitions and practices which have stood in the way of progress. It has given new life to forms of mythology which the higher thought of the country, if left to itself, would have left behind or retained merely for their literary or archæological value. The desire to show that every mythological belief may be a fitting vehicle for the religious consciousness has prevented the discriminative treatment of the inheritance of the past which is essential to progress. Instead of using symbols merely as instruments in the quest for reality, theosophy has worshipped these symbols and so has failed to pass beyond them. The success of theosophy in winning popularity

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Murdoch, *Theosophical Craze*, p. 72.

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might be taken as an illustration of the principle that when the great gods go, the little gods arrive. When there is a revolt against an unreasoned and dogmatic—though still living—faith, when mere revolt, negation, or agnosticism is felt to be unsatisfying, and when, nevertheless, the soul is filled with a passionate desire for contact with the hidden and infinite reality, then is the day of theosophy and kindred faiths with all their associated tendencies in the direction of the magical. They claim to minister to those who are dissatisfied with the ordinary and in whom thought has begun to stir vague questionings. But they do not demand too much of thought, and they promise quick returns in the way of unusual experiences, ministering to the desire for sensationalism in the spiritual sphere. For their motive power they rely upon an emotional uprush which will be sufficiently overwhelming to cover over any vagueness or illogicality of thought, and, being pleased with temporary satisfaction, they are not perhaps sufficiently careful to connect this emotional uprush with a man's persistent interests. Our desire in any religious aspiration is to escape from the subjective to the

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objective, from our own dreams to the realities beyond us, and theosophy in its magical aspect appears to satisfy in the speediest possible way this desire for contact with supersensible reality. But it is doubtful whether theosophy does not leave us still in the region of dreams and "prospects in the mind," and whether emotionalism can ever lead us from imagination to truth. The spasmodic contact with the unseen, which is all that magical theosophy primarily offers, can hardly establish our hearts with the assurance of faith, and there is need of a large infusion of the concentration and one-pointedness of the philosophical spirit if we are to get safely beyond clairvoyance and occultism. Wordsworth has well described the mood which theosophy sympathetically understands and to which it ministers, but he has also suggested safeguards against the dangers of this mood, and of these theosophy has not been sufficiently mindful :

"The soul,  
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt  
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense  
Of possible sublimity, whereto  
With growing faculties she doth aspire,  
With faculties still growing, feeling still  
That whatsoever point they gain, they still  
Have something to pursue."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Prelude*, II., 315.

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Theosophy has been satisfied too easily and has not insisted strongly enough that our growing faculties should press upwards to the saner and safer levels of thought.

## CHAPTER V

### The Religious and Ethical Value of Theosophy

It is curious that in connection with almost every mystical reaction from mechanism and dogmatism we find an outburst of occultism. It seems to be the inevitable consequence of a perfectly legitimate demand that imagination should be allowed fuller rights of access to the unseen world. If, however, imagination is unrestrained and uncontrolled by thought, it is apt to afford us a specious satisfaction and does not lead us beyond itself to the goal of true mysticism. The distinction between theosophic imagination and true mysticism is allied to the distinction between the ecstatic life and the unitive life. True mysticism leads us out of ourselves into an objective world, into contact with the deepest reality, with which we may discover a kinship and enter into a communion closer even than that afforded by human friendship



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and love, the reality all the while remaining above us as an inspiring and controlling power—revealing its transcendence as well as its immanence. We do not, like the magicians, retain this reality under our control ; we rather yield ourselves to its control, comprehensively and absolutely. The aim of true mysticism is not to remain content with an emotional state of ecstasy, but to extract from it a reasonable and action-controlling apprehension of the Divine Reality which the emotion holds as it were in solution. In striving for objectivity, however, we do not indicate our willingness to exchange poetry for prose, neither do we fail to recognise that religious satisfaction can come only in association with absorbing personal intimacy ; we seek to realise, and express in the most solemn affirmations of our souls, that the dominating factor in the intimacy is not ourselves, but the Divine Other with whom we desire to establish uninterrupted communion. From what has been said it appears to be at least questionable whether theosophy is capable of allying itself with mysticism of this deeper kind, and whether it does not stop half-way to the goal, forgetting the Divine Object

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in its absorption in the emotions of the subject, and sacrificing the unity to the variety.

This naturally leads us to ask the important question whether theosophy can be regarded as in the truest sense a *religion*. It undoubtedly claims to be a religion—claims indeed to be the essence of all religions or at least to supply the point of view from which the full benefit of the various religions can be<sup>1</sup> appreciated. Mrs. Cooper-Oakley describes it as “that glorious wisdom religion which includes in its scope all religions and all philosophies.”<sup>2</sup> Theosophy, again, claims to be the attainment of those who *know*, and one of its exponents describes religion as “the word of those who, having seen, know, while philosophy is the word of those who, not having yet seen, reason by analogy from that which they know to that which they only think.”<sup>2</sup> And the ideal of theosophy, as we have seen, would be to get beyond mere knowledge in the sense of ratiocination to an immediate experience of the Divine—which is also the ideal of religion.

To a considerable extent theosophy fulfils

<sup>1</sup> *Traces of a Hidden Tradition*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Edger, *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 41.

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the functions of a religion. It emphasises the spiritual rather than the material, and it promises deliverance from the effects of pain and evil. It has brought peace of mind to many and it offers to deepen this peace. Amidst the changes of earthly things it leads our thoughts to the permanence of the eternal, and it holds out the hope of a certain kind of immortality. Finally, it lays much stress on the brotherhood of man, and thus provides an ostensible motive for personal and social ethical endeavour.

But has it established its claim to be a religion? In general we may say that we require of a religion that it should move freely and joyously in a spiritual world, that it should at least touch upon some of the mysteries of that world, that it should satisfy our heart as well as our intellect, and that it should be a gospel—a “good news”—for all, giving them comfort and guidance for this present life and a sure hope for that which is to come. The establishment of a religious claim on behalf of theosophy depends upon a consideration of its value for life, both theoretical and practical. What lessons may we derive from its teaching which

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will be useful for the illumination of our theory and the inspiration of our action ?

In the first place, theosophy, formally at least, teaches the necessity of liberality and enlightenment. Its upholders profess to seek the good wherever they may find it. In their study of Comparative Religion they cast their net wide, and they seek to free themselves from dogmatic narrowness as well as from harsh judgments in regard to other religions. Truth is to be welcomed from all quarters, and theosophy is the unity of all religions. As Mrs. Besant puts it in her formulation of the policy of the Theosophical Society : "They see every religion as a partial expression of the Divine Wisdom, and prefer its study to its condemnation and its practice to proselytism."<sup>1</sup> In this attitude theosophists, even though they may not worship the incarnate Christ, have yet often traced the wider workings of His Spirit ; and they read a much needed lesson to those defenders of Christianity who see in it merely a system of rigid dogma, and who harshly distinguish between Christian truth and other truth as between the good and the bad, instead

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy*, p. 91.

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of relating the two as the best to the better or the better to the good and thus confessing that Christ came not to destroy but to fulfil.

Moreover, theosophists have borne striking *general* testimony to the power of the spiritual. At this date, perhaps, we do not require to be delivered from the domination of crass materialism, but we certainly need to be delivered from that loss of faith which follows upon excessive dependence upon mathematical and physical categories. We require to be reawakened to a sense of the spiritual world so that we may appreciate its value not only in humanity but in the natural world around us. We are only beginning to open our eyes upon the the supersensible world, only beginning to realise the illimitable powers of the human soul and the intimate union between spirit and body. In the awakening of their minds theosophy has brought help to many, and it might assist them still more if it would persistently emphasise a higher rather than a lower spiritualism. •

It may also assist us in getting rid of the dualism between mind and matter which we are so apt to assert and from which so many of our

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difficulties arise. At the same time, in leading our thoughts towards a unity, it encourages, to a certain extent, a concrete rather than an abstract interpretation of mysticism, enabling us thus to retain something of the poetry without the paganism of the more naturalistic religions and to re-establish what Clement calls "that ancient natural fellowship with heaven." As a consequence of this we may appreciate more fully the secret of the sacraments of religion and discover again the truth associated with the principle of all incarnation—the union of the spirit with the flesh. It is easier for theosophists than for some Protestants to understand how the material may be a channel of spiritual life. In the same way, if there is a natural union between spirit and matter, many of the problems connected with the miraculous will disappear. If the spirit may actually be the revivifier of matter, we shall be less inclined to place miracles in a class by themselves and abandon ourselves to amazement at their strangeness.

As has been already noticed, the power of being able to say anything at all about a super-sensible world or a life beyond, is an element

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which adds greatly to the attractiveness of theosophy, and the readiness to enter upon speculations regarding the unseen world is itself of considerable value. The influence of theosophy saves us at least from dismissing as foolish the vast body of apocalyptic beliefs which form so large a part of our religious inheritance. From one point of view it might be said that all eschatology is theosophical in character in so far as it is an attempt to give expression to the mystic consciousness. It is moreover possible that theosophy may throw some light upon the meaning of the ministry of angels about which we speak so glibly and sing so frequently, but in which our belief has so little reality. We may also gain some support from the same source for the kindred conception of the communion of saints, a thought which is full of comfort but which is so elusive that we are apt to confine it, as a pious imagination, within the narrow limits of religious services, unless indeed we seek to satisfy the relevant desires through the commonplace contributions of ordinary spiritualism.

Again, most people have a deep-rooted belief in the efficacy of prayer, but yet can say

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little or nothing about the grounds on which they base their belief. In its emphasis upon the power of active thought theosophy at least suggests a way in which our prayers may become efficacious. We may not agree with theosophy as to the details of the transformation of thought, through a process of vibrations, into actual existences. We may also be inclined to think that theosophists are occupied too much with the idea of immediate or mediate power, which they may wield through prayer and too little with the necessity of placing that power at the absolute disposal of God. But the admission of the creative power of thought is itself of the utmost value. As regards the effect of prayer upon the individual, Mrs. Besant's theory would be that "the effect of thought is to transform the thinker into the likeness of his ideal, and thus build up a noble character."<sup>1</sup> The effect of prayer upon others would be explained by the doctrine that "man is himself a constant creator of invisible beings . . . an army of invisible servants who range through the invisible worlds, seeking to do his will."<sup>2</sup> Prayer may also reach human

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy*, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 241.



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helpers who may listen to us and co-operate with us through their subtle bodies. Above them stand the hierarchy of spiritual powers, and all together act under the one system as channels through which the omnipresent Divine Life may operate. Prayer is rightly regarded by theosophists as a drawing upon the central resources of the universe. Even though we may not agree with them as to the exact method of distribution of these resources, the central thought is exceedingly valuable, and the chapter on prayer in the book from which we have quoted is worthy of reverent study.

In a more general way and apart from definite prayer, the theory of thought-vibrations enables us to appreciate the subtleties of the influence which we exert upon our fellows. We speak vaguely of "creating an atmosphere," and the theosophists attempt to give form to this idea by pointing out, with great emphasis and with an appeal to our sense of responsibility, that every thought which we send forth has an effect for good or for evil, creating forces which either help or retard the progress of the community. The idea that we all have a share in the central store of Divine

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energy and can apply it either for good or evil purposes, suggests a metaphysical basis for brotherhood. Our lives are identified in their essence, and therefore "all that a man would do for his brother of the flesh . . . is the measure of what he owes to each who shares with him the one life."<sup>1</sup> There are many beautiful passages in the theosophical writings showing how we may and ought to help the weak and describing the evil reaction upon the oppressors themselves of any tendency to harsh dealing. Mrs. Besant applies the lesson, not only to the people of other lands, but also to Indians in respect especially of their caste oppressiveness. "Do you think that the cries of the miserable have not entered into the ears of God? And He looked upon India and made a stern decree: As you enslave your brethren, you shall yourselves be enslaved."<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, we may notice as an element of value the emphasis which is laid by theosophy upon progress in the after life. We may disagree to a very large extent with the stages of the progress as these are indicated and described, but

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Ancient Wisdom*, p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> *Theosophy and Life's Deeper Problems*, p. 26.

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the strong expression of the demand for progress is of the utmost importance. Theosophists accuse Christianity of caring only to make men saints and of paying little attention to the development of the saints, whereas they themselves profess to be able to lead the saints on through ever ascending stages to the glory of the Beatific Vision.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt a certain amount of truth in the accusation, and Protestant Christianity in particular, in its over anxiety to avoid the doctrine of purgatory, has been too apt to assert dogmatically that at death everything is decided, and that "as the tree falls, so shall it lie." But surely "it doth not yet appear what we shall be," and opportunity for progress beyond this mortal life is not to be ruthlessly and rigidly denied.

Notwithstanding all these elements of value, there are certain dangers associated with theosophy against which we should do well to be on our guard. Enough has already been said about its failure to maintain the scientific point of view and its consequent relapse into dogmatism. We have also noted that, though it expresses a revolt from materialism, yet in its

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mrs. Besant, *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 31.

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scientific and metaphysical conclusions it may arrive at a new materialism, or, rather, a super sensible sensationalism—if the contradictory phrase may be allowed—which may seem at first sight to promise adequate explanations, but leads in the end to vagueness of thought and to a dangerous alliance with magic and superstition. Reaction from the original delusion of materialism is not enough if its place is filled by other delusions. There is a slight degree of relevance to theosophy in the remarks of Prof. Gilbert Murray about the Stoic and Epicurean period ; “ The great thing to remember is that the mind of man cannot be enlightened permanently by merely teaching him to reject some particular set of superstitions. There is an infinite supply of other superstitions always at hand ; and the mind that desires such things—that is, the mind that has not trained itself to the hard discipline of reasonableness and honesty, will, as soon as its devils are cast out, proceed to fill itself with their relations.”<sup>1</sup>

There are also dangers connected with the liberality upon which theosophy—frequently

<sup>1</sup> *Four Stages of Greek Religion*, p. 111.

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with justice—prides itself. We must of course gather material from all sources and be ready to recognise value wherever it may be found, but we must also remember that mere exuberance of growth is not always a sign of the highest quality of growth or of growth in the right direction. Liberality must be controlled by a principle of organisation and our search for truth must be part of our endeavour to substitute a cosmos for a chaos. In the sphere of religious study we may wish to use the material supplied by each religion in order to gain a complete view of the whole, but we should not immediately conclude from this that all religions are equally valuable. We must search for the keystone of the arch or the organising principle of the system, and it is possible that one religion may be more suitable than others for the expression of this principle. Amongst the religious views that are good we must seek for those that are better, and amongst the better we must press on to discover the *best*. •

Further, if theosophy is to establish its universal appeal and thus serve the purposes of a religion, it must modify its intellectualism and

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its esotericism. It must pass from theory to life, from the subjective to the objective, from imagination and emotional satisfaction to the truth of fact. And it must present us with a controlling reality which can be understood by all and appreciated by them. It has been said of Gnosticism that one of the causes of its failure was that it ignored the value of a historical founder and was neglectful of the duty of winning the ignorant. It was a school for the wise and prudent only. Theosophy seems to exhibit similar defects. One of Madame Blavatsky's books, *The Voice of the Silence*, is dedicated "to the Few." Mr. Sinnett seems to speak with approval of philosophers who were "content to hoard their wisdom and supply the crowd with a religion adapted rather to the understanding of its recipients than to the eternal verities."<sup>1</sup> Complaints are frequent in theosophical literature not only of the danger but of the difficulty of unfolding its secrets.<sup>2</sup> The general impression with which we are left is that theosophy is too elaborate for the ordinary mind. In regard to its doctrines it is not very often true that "he who runs may

<sup>1</sup> *Occult World*, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 137.

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read, if he have eyes for such a script,"<sup>x</sup> and, in any case, too much is made to depend upon the conditional clause of the statement just quoted. The power of occult penetration is far too frequently treated as if it were a special faculty which those who are not in possession of it, must just do without. For the privileged all may be well: as for the unprivileged, in the immense variety of the theosophical systems they may find some elements which even they can appreciate, or they may comfort themselves with the thought that if they do not know now, they will know some day. Theosophy prides itself upon facing the true facts of the situation in regard to the differing levels of human attainment and abandons what is, for it, the futile attempt to find a common satisfaction for all. But it has had in mind chiefly an intellectual or doctrinal satisfaction, and has not considered sufficiently the possibility of finding a factual basis for religion which may be able to meet the needs of beings on most diverse levels of intellectual attainment. In the meantime it is slightly contemptuous of those on the lower levels. One theosophical writer

<sup>x</sup> Cf. Mrs. Besant, *Ancient Wisdom*, p. 178.

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asks: "Who would feed a flock of sheep on learned dissertations on botany instead of on grass, or, in other words, cast pearls before swine?"<sup>1</sup> He forgets that even the learned do not *feed on* dissertations—they put them to other uses of an altruistic character; and the ignorant, although they may not understand the dissertations, may yet appreciate the facts which they are intended to set forth and interpret.

The distinctly non-evangelical attitude which is found amongst many theosophists, is occasionally due to a serious misapprehension of the Christian motive for evangelism. Theosophists are fond of presenting this motive as if it were a desire merely to save men from the pains of hell, and, as they themselves profess to be superior to such a motive and to recognise no necessity for such a deliverance, they conceive that they may also relieve themselves of the responsibility for evangelism. They may sit at ease within their garden of privilege, and the philosophically minded amongst them may revive for their strengthening, the old idea of higher and lower kinds of

<sup>1</sup> Taylor, *Essays on Theosophy*, p. 4.



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knowledge which is so dangerously prevalent, e.g., in ancient Indian thought. Mr. Sinnett manifests a tendency to exclusiveness when he indicates that it is the duty of the theosophical adepts not to disseminate but to keep alive the knowledge they possess, the task of breaking down the prejudice of the multitude being of decidedly lesser importance.<sup>1</sup> It is to be feared that Mr. Sinnett represents the predominant tendency in theosophical writings, but it would be unjust not to refer also to the healthier and more hopeful attitude of Mrs. Besant, as indicated in the following: "Knowledge that is not shared becomes a canker in the brain, and the power to know diminishes and is finally lost when you refuse to share with your ignorant brother what you acquire."<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Besant has not forgotten the evangelism of her earlier faith, though she has failed to find a sufficiently well secured place for it within the borders of theosophy.

Passing from general attitude to results, we may note that some of the conclusions at which theosophy arrives are not altogether helpful in their effect upon practical life. A

<sup>1</sup> *Occult World*, p. 50.    <sup>2</sup> *Theosophy and Life's Deeper Problems*, p. 91.

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tendency towards absolutism manifests itself, with the usual pessimistic consequences. The value of the individual is depreciated. Personality is a phase of his being which he retains only while passing through the lower stages of existence. At the highest stage he hopes to get rid of all distinctions between himself and the Divine. His goal is identity, not communion, and salvation is by deification rather than by ethical obedience. This may seem to be the true interpretation of mysticism, which has been described as "the logic of identity as applied to religion." It may seem also to set us in a proper relation to our fellows. Many theosophists, following Deussen in his remarks upon the fundamental principle of the Vedānta, argue that it is only through emphasis on identity that we can arrive at a pure understanding of the Christian command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."<sup>1</sup> But the general result is undoubtedly fatalism, conservatism, ethical weakness, and indifference. Activity in the service of the future and of others gives place too easily to contemplation of the present and to introspection. There is

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lilian Edger, *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 180.

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a lack of human warmth and attractiveness in the ideal expressed in the teaching of Koot Hoomi: "To crown all, human and purely individual personal feelings, blood-ties and friendships, patriotism and race-predilection, will all give way to become blended into one universal feeling, the one true and holy, the only unselfish and eternal one."<sup>1</sup> The same impression of aloofness, if not of coldness, is produced by Mrs. Besant's saying that "before the eyes can see they must be incapable of tears."<sup>2</sup> The consequence of the pursuit of this ideal seems to be that, as the saints approach the goal more nearly, they become more and more divested of their power to assist us at least by obvious sympathy and help. Madame Blavatsky tells us that to appeal to the protection of the perfected men or angels "is as foolish as to believe that their sympathy can be secured by any kind of propitiation."<sup>3</sup>

Little help is thus to be expected from those who have attained to high levels in the spiritual life, and our own souls seem emptied of their force. We become a prey to fatalism and lose

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Sinnett, *Occult World*, p. 152.

<sup>2</sup> *In the Outer Court*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Secret Doctrine*, p. 282.

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our ethical spring. The process in which we are involved will pass through its inevitable stages, and we can do little to alter it. We are caught in the stream of time and are borne on helplessly by the force of the current. And this feeling of helplessness is increased by the reverence for the past which is inculcated by theosophy in common with all intellectualistic theories. If we think that all wisdom and perfection is to be found in the past, we shall not only feel that there is an overwhelming force pressing upon us against which it is futile to struggle, but that it would be impious to suggest that the past, or the present which follows so closely upon it, requires any improvement. We shall consequently make no strenuous effort towards the introduction of a new and improved state of things. The very elaborateness also of the systems which theosophy has constructed, often produces a paralysing effect upon the individual mind. Amidst so many intricate details we tend to feel that we are only very small parts of a vast machine, and that we can do so little that it is of no consequence whether we do that little or not. We are oppressed also by the feeling

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that the leaders of theosophical thought hardly seem to come down to a level at which we stand. They seem to stand on inaccessible heights, dealing by preference with those who are already perfect. One of the things which attracts them most about the ancient mysteries and which they note with approval is that the object of the mysteries was not the making of a good man, but that only the man who was already good was admissible.<sup>1</sup> But the ordinary man does not feel that he is already good.

If, in brighter moods, we feel that we are too scrupulous and that we are making too much of our sinfulness, we may indeed be comforted for the moment, but we lose our motive for moral effort and also miss the joy of victory. Theosophists seem to run rather light-heartedly into this danger. We need not go so far as to say with Murdoch that with them "the sense of sin is an absolute blank,"<sup>2</sup> but still we must recognise that there is a disposition to assure us that we have committed mistakes rather than sins. Salvation is regarded rather as a release from bodily conditions of a distressing character than from sin. It is possible also that we may

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mrs. Besant, *Theosophy*, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Theosophical Craze*, p. 71.

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be condemning as sinful what is merely an illustration of exuberance or an inevitable consequence of our past. There may be periods at which the gratification of desire is good and not evil, and "he who sins may only be following the law of his growth by seeking experience."<sup>1</sup> In any case we cannot help it. "Whatever of weakness and sin you feel in yourselves is but the result of your imperfect development."<sup>2</sup> This is a comfortable doctrine, but does not move us to strenuous effort. There are some people whom it may not be difficult to convince that forgiveness is superfluous, but they are not usually found amongst the saints.

And if we need not condemn, neither, according to the theosophists, need we pity ourselves. Self pity is the other aspect of envy of others. But as we now are, so other more fortunate people have been, and as they now are, so we shall become—inevitably. All we may do is slightly to hasten the process. In any one particular life we can do very little, but, as we have seen, the theosophical opinion is that what we do now may produce consequences of the utmost

<sup>1</sup> Edger, *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 54.

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importance in a future life. It is probable, however, that most men will be more impressed by the smallness of their present opportunities than by problematic consequences in another life.

Indeed, consideration of the future life—or rather lives—in the form described by theosophy, will rather increase our lethargy. We shall be apt to think that we need not trouble about things that are wrong in this life, because we may easily put them right in some future life. We need not hurry in our ethical endeavour because there will be plenty of time in the innumerable lives of the future. “What is time, however long, to you who are eternal?”<sup>1</sup> We should not anticipate or encourage ethical crises. Conversion to a higher point of view will not come as the result of struggle; it is rather “a natural, inevitable, and at some time or other, a universally experienced phase of the inner life.”<sup>2</sup> Or, as Mr. Leadbeater puts it, “This is a school in which no pupil ever fails.”<sup>3</sup>

Theosophy, therefore, does not seem to have provided sufficiently for ethical endeavour or

<sup>1</sup> *Theosophy and Life's Deeper Problems*, p. 29. ¶

<sup>2</sup> Cousins, *Bases of Theosophy*, p. 36.    <sup>3</sup> *Text-book of Theosophy*, p. 98.

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for the preservation of those values with which ethics is primarily concerned. Theosophists tend to emphasise "a perfection that is, rather than a perfection that is to be."<sup>1</sup> Even if the present is admitted to be unsatisfying, the ultimate goal is not described in such a way as to meet the demands of our moral consciousness. The man who has attained to the highest degree of enlightenment is one who has left behind the distinction between good and evil. He is one who has "passed beyond even sainthood."<sup>2</sup> Good belongs merely to the sheath of personality which must be left behind and so cannot be reckoned as ultimately valuable. "All the qualities so useful in ordinary life, such as moral indignation, repulsion from evil, judgment of others—have no room when unity is realised."<sup>3</sup> Seeing that our personality will be merged in the eternal, why should we strive for its perfection? The kind of immortality which theosophy promises does not inspire us to strenuous ethical endeavour. There is little of conscious continuity between the various lives which we pass

<sup>1</sup> Jinarajadasa, *Nature of Mysticism*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Leadbeater, *Textbook of Theosophy*, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Besant, *Introduction to Yoga*, p. 157.



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through during our various incarnations ; why then should we trouble about the effects of the deeds which we may do in our present life? Continuous personal life is the only adequate basis for effort which we may find within ourselves. And as regards the inspiration which may come from the Divine above us and beyond us, this will be sufficient only if we can regard the ultimate reality, not as a characterless Absolute, but as possessing a definite nature which can be described as good. Love is the highest motive for all action, and love is not an ecstasy consuming its fires within the consciousness of the subject. It must have an object which shall be worthy of it and shall persistently summon it to the pursuit of the Ideal which is also the Real.

## CHAPTER VI

### **The Relation Between Theosophy and Christianity**

IN view of what has been already said, the general position we feel constrained to take up is that theosophy has much to teach many of the orthodox exponents of Christianity, but that on the whole theosophy has misinterpreted Christianity, with very disastrous results. It is peculiarly unfortunate that many of the leaders of theosophical thought seem to have had experience of only a very narrow type of Christianity. They have not unnaturally argued from their own experience as if it were the only possible kind of Christian experience, and their reasonings share the fallaciousness of all other arguments from a part to the whole. If they had taken the trouble to cast their nets more widely, they would not have misinterpreted Christianity so seriously. They would have discovered that much which is labelled theosophical, and used

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effectively in drawing adherents away from Christianity and towards theosophy, is Christian in a most fundamental sense. The results of patient investigation and sympathetic appreciation would also have shown them that Christianity can satisfy all the needs which theosophy professes to meet, and can do so in such a way as to avoid the dangers into which theosophy has frequently fallen.

Formally, theosophy professes to be on the most friendly terms with Christianity, and to be opposed only to a narrow type of Christianity. As Miss Edger says, "A Christian who is at the same time an earnest and believing student of theosophy will be a much better Christian than he was before he ever heard of theosophy."<sup>1</sup> Theosophy wishes, as it were, to save Christianity from itself, to re-interpret it so that its essence and value may be properly preserved. It is a question, however, whether Christianity stands so much in need of re-interpretation as theosophists imagine, and also whether much of their re-interpretation, both of so-called orthodox Christianity and of essential Christianity, is not misinterpretation. There

<sup>1</sup> *Elements of Theosophy*, p. 202.

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are many truths connected with Christianity which theosophists proclaim as their special re-discovery, but which even "orthodox" Christians would regard as fundamental in their own faith, orthodox though it may be, and as hardly standing in need of the assistance of theosophy for their promulgation. Theosophists may re-label these truths if they please; so long as the truths are emphasised Christians need not greatly care what labels may be attached. They would urge only that change of label does not alter the fact of origin, and that orthodox Christianity should not be attacked for *not* possessing the very truths which she gave, and still gives, to theosophy.

There are other doctrines which theosophists proclaim as containing the essence of Christianity for which further evidence is required if it is to be conclusively shown that they are indeed reinterpretations and not misinterpretations. We have already noticed that Christianity seems to undergo more thorough reconstruction at the hands of theosophists than does any other religion, and, before accepting this reconstruction, we must be very sure that it is based on

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thorough historical investigation and is not the outcome of a vague uncomfortable feeling that the intense devotion which Christianity demands of the followers of Christ, is specially incompatible with the type of Catholicity on which theosophy prides itself. It may turn out, not only that organised Christianity is more theosophical than theosophists are willing to admit, but that original Christianity is less theosophical in many of its aspects than theosophists are persistently endeavouring to prove.

The general position of theosophists is that we reach the true essence of Christianity if we consider it first of all as one of the mystery religions of the period in which it arose. It may be the best of them, and may contain the greatest amount of permanently valuable truth. But it shares with the other religions of the period the disposition to distinguish between an esoteric and an exoteric section of its adherents. Jesus Christ Himself selected an inner group of disciples and to them He communicated truths of a high intellectual character which were not to be revealed to the outside world. Christianity was originally theosophical, and throughout much of her early history was a

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suitable vehicle for the transmission of theosophical truth. What was good in Christianity was theosophical, and Christianity would have remained wholly good if she had been more faithful to the task of handing down the hidden tradition. But Christianity has fallen, and her leaders have failed to fulfil their high vocation. The features of Christianity which seem to the modern theosophists most unattractive, are due to the disappearance or corruption of the original hidden tradition and to the materialism and narrow dogmatism of the accredited exponents of Christianity. The religion of Christ has become materialised and vulgarised. The sacred mysteries have been profaned by the admission of the unworthy multitude. Christianity has neglected her original precious treasure of wisdom and knowledge. Instead of being the herald of new thought and life to the world of the twentieth century, she has remained attached to the bare historical facts of bygone centuries, and, observing the letter rather than the spirit, has wandered in arid wastes of dogma, indifferent to beauty and poetry, mechanised into institutions and systems. She has thus driven into opposition,

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or at least into agnosticism, the choicest minds of the age, the minds of the thoughtful and inquiring. "The very flower of Christianity is perishing for lack of knowledge," according to Mrs. Besant,<sup>1</sup> and theosophists in general accuse Christians of to-day of having forgotten the pure religion of Christ and His Apostles, of regarding men as all on one low level of spiritual attainment or even of despising knowledge altogether.

According to the theosophical arguments, there is little excuse for such degeneracy. Christianity inherited a tradition in which there were many theosophical elements, and theosophists hold that it is preposterous to think that early Christianity would have been guilty of the folly of offering the same kind of truth to all and sundry or of attempting to satisfy the more cultured with what could have been easily understood by the common multitude. The intention of Jesus Himself is perfectly clear. He spoke to the outside world in parables, but to the small—very small—body of disciples He had selected, He expounded the meaning of the parables, because to them was "given

<sup>1</sup> *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 34.

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to know the mystery of the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> In a similar strain He says to His disciples, “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now,”<sup>2</sup> “What I do thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter”<sup>3</sup>; “I go to prepare a place for you.”<sup>4</sup> In all these passages, according to Mrs. Besant, Jesus is alluding to hidden truths which would afterwards be communicated to His disciples, and which, though they have not been recorded in the current Gospels, would no doubt be handed down as a precious tradition.<sup>6</sup> Again, the injunction against “casting pearls before swine” is intended to distinguish forcibly (though not offensively, if the language is understood according to the current usage of the time) between the inner circle of initiates and the outside multitudes. Allusions to the “strait gate” and the “narrow way” suggest the difficulties of entrance to the privileged circle, and the phrase, the “new birth,” emphasises the importance of the

<sup>1</sup> Matt. iv. 10.    <sup>2</sup> John xvi. 12.    <sup>3</sup> John xiii. 7.    <sup>4</sup> John xiv. 2.

<sup>5</sup> The misinterpretation given by Madame Blavatsky of the verse, “Pray to thy Father which is in secret,” Matt. v. 6, should be noted. The opposition is plainly between public paraded prayer and private prayer, whereas Madame Blavatsky takes the word “secret” as indicating esoteric conditions.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 40.



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initiation itself. Especially does the use of the word "perfect"<sup>1</sup> indicate a group of initiates who were reaching forward to the highest and most exclusive knowledge.

The Apostles in this matter followed the example of their Master. John, we are told by Mrs. Besant, represented the spirit of mystic devotion which sought the ecstatic, while the later great Apostle, St. Paul, represented the wisdom side of the Mysteries."<sup>2</sup> The language of the latter may throughout be interpreted from this point of view. He also makes use of the word "perfect"; saying that he "will speak wisdom among them that are perfect"<sup>3</sup> He calls himself a "steward of the mysteries of God"<sup>4</sup> and he speaks of "the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the *hidden* wisdom."<sup>5</sup> His interpretation of the Christian life is mystical *and* theosophical. This life does not consist in reverent memory or in the external following of the precepts of a teacher, but is a union of the closest possible kind. It is to be *in* Christ, to be a new creature. Its aim is to attain to the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Matt. v. 48 and John xvii. 23.      <sup>2</sup> *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. ii. 6.      <sup>4</sup> 1 Cor. iv. 1.      <sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. ii. 7.

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'resurrection of the dead," which, according to the theosophists, means decisive initiation into the life-giving mysteries.<sup>2</sup>

The theosophical interpretation of the person of Christ is in accordance with the presentation of His teaching, and follows mainly the lines of Gnostic tradition. The importance of the historical life of Christ is almost entirely refined away, or, rather, the historical Jesus is detached from the mystical Christ. The latter is said to have made use of the body of Jesus merely as a vehicle, just as in the Gnostic system the *Soter* inhabited the body of Jesus for a limited period and separated again from it before the passion. There was no incarnation in the full sense of the word. The natural consequence of this doctrine is that the historical life of Jesus is transformed out of recognition. He is said to have been born in Palestine in the year 105 B.C. He was trained in an Essene community of the desert and entered a monastery at which learned men from India and Egypt were frequent visitors.

<sup>2</sup> It might be useful to put over against these quotations St. Paul's account of the "fruits of the spirit" in Gal. v. 22, where the ethical note is so strongly marked. Surely it is the initiates who might be expected to show the "fruits of the spirit," and yet it does not seem as if St. Paul thought that they had "passed beyond sainthood."

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He thus became initiated into the mysteries, especially those associated with Egypt, and, through these and other influences, was gradually formed into a fitting earthly vehicle for one of the great "Sons of God." The Christ descended upon Him at His baptism and inspired Him during the three years of His earthly ministry, being especially manifest at the Transfiguration, the importance of which ordinary Christians so strangely overlook. After the Crucifixion the Christ left the body of Jesus, but, true to His promise, He returned in His subtle spiritual body and for fifty years remained amongst His disciples, teaching them and establishing the mysteries.

Having completed His evolution on the human level, Jesus became one of the Masters of Wisdom, and to Him was committed the care of Christianity that He might protect it and enlighten it through the centuries. He became a kind of special official, sent forth by the head of the department of religion and education—the great Official who "either comes Himself or sends one of His pupils to found a new religion when He decides that one is needed."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Leadbeater, *Textbook of Theosophy*, p. 12.

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There is little that can be said in support of the historicity of the narrative of the life of Jesus with which the theosophists supply us, neither do they offer any undogmatic proofs of their assertions. The interpretation of the doings and sayings of Christ, though it emphasises certain aspects of His religious experience, is obviously unduly dominated by the desire to bring His teaching into line with the mystery religions and with theosophy. It seems to miss the plain meaning of His words and is out of harmony with the general purpose of His life. For one thing, it is hardly possible for us to imagine Him as exclusive or intellectualistic or as deferring the duty of evangelism to the indefinite future. His appeal was a universal appeal. He came to seek and to save those that were lost, to bring life to them through His own divine life, and to plant their steps firmly upon the path that leads upwards to God. Just because He brought to men the revelation of a *life*, and not merely of a philosophical theory, He can appeal to men of all classes—to the poor and the simple as well as to the wealthy and the learned.

But universality of appeal is not inconsistent

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with variety of appeal. Because the message of Christ was to all, it does not follow that He concerned himself only with the beginnings of the spiritual life and did nothing to meet the needs emerging on the higher levels of development. Because He has a message for the simple, He does not consider it unnecessary to satisfy, from out His treasures of wisdom and knowledge, the intellectual aspirations of the learned. There is no ground for arguing that because Christianity is life rather than philosophy, it is not a philosophy at all. Theosophists are strangely misled by the narrow dogmatic upholders of Christianity if they think that Christianity is essentially anti-intellectual or that it stands or falls by a formal and forensic theory of the atonement which makes salvation in all cases an instantaneous transaction and allows no room for after-development. Christianity welcomes the activity of the intellect, though it may not have always been sufficiently careful to make this welcome truly cordial. But it refuses to refine itself away into a mere theory, or to distinguish between esoteric and exoteric schools amongst its adherents, reserving for the

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Former its most precious treasures, and soothing its conscience with regard to the latter by saying, with Mrs. Besant, "for those who are ignorant, exoteric religion is enough." Christianity is a Gospel for the human race, and there is no one who may not find satisfaction within it whatever the degree of his powers and attainments.

We found that one of the defects of the theosophical religious attitude was its neglect of the objective and the actual. So, in connection with Christianity, its fundamental mistake is the neglect of the historical Christ. It is occupied too much with the interpretation of Christ and too little with Christ Himself. It rightly emphasises the idea that one of the gifts of Christianity is the opportunity which it offers of a mystical relation with Christ, but it seems to think that the mystical and the historical are mutually exclusive of each other. It is obsessed by the idea that Christianity teaches only a substitutionary doctrine of atonement—a bare external, legal, and artificial transaction belonging altogether to the sphere of objective action. In its anxiety to get away from such a theory, theosophy denies all objective value

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to the death of Christ. The crucifixion becomes for it a mere symbol, and the only law which can be regarded as objectively valid and yet ethically significant, is the law of *karma*, which assures us that no action of ours can fail of its effects. But Mrs. Besant herself speaks of voluntarily associating ourselves with the *law of sacrifice*. Why should she not allow that this law might have had an important place in historical reality, and might have exemplified itself as an expression of divine action, not in contradiction of, but in modification of the law of *karma*? The law of *karma*, while it assures us that no effort of ours will be fruitless, does not provide for the case of the man who feels himself incapable of making an effort. But is he to be left unprovided for? Evil desires, according to theosophists themselves, can be dealt with only in the sphere to which they originally belong. And they belong to the sphere of the actual, both as existent powers in human nature and in the results which they produce. May not, therefore, the grace of God stretch down into the realm of the objective, and may not the crucifixion of Christ be, not a mere symbol, but a fact—the supreme

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What fact it may be—in the history of God's actual dealings with the race of men? Is it impossible to believe that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself"—the world of their actions and of their history, not merely of their thoughts?

Theory seems to have an irresistible fascination for theosophists, and Christianity appeals to them chiefly where it can be theorised. Thus theosophy is specially attracted by the Logos doctrine, and would almost make this doctrine, as a doctrine, central in Christianity, forgetting that, as Dr. Glover puts it, "if Christianity had depended on the Logos, it would have followed the Logos to the limbo whither went Æon and Aporrhoia and Spermatikos Logos. But that the Logos has not perished is due to the one fact that with the Cross it has been borne through the ages on the shoulders of Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

Theosophy fails to reach a true conception of the uniqueness of Christ and of the miraculousness of His divinity, because of its general tendency, not only to rest in theory, but to substitute creations of the imagination for objective facts. It is unhealthily subjective and emotional in its mysticism. Like the Yogi of

<sup>1</sup> *Conflict of Religions*, p. 304.



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the East, the theosophist is mainly interested in the states of consciousness. He unfolds his intuitions by means of imagination rather than by reason, and his imagination remains uncontrolled by the laws of objective reality. He reaches beyond his dreams only to a God who is hidden in the mist of abstractions. He is unable to conceive of a God of personal character, and when the holiness of God as above us and beyond us as well as within us is not realised, moral values become dim and the urgency of the moral demand is weakened. The sense of sin is less acute, and, when there is no consciousness of wrong that has to be put right, there can be no full appreciation of a Divine revelation through sacrifice, and redemption will appear to be superfluous. Within a religion which is based upon a vague sense of identity between the human and the Divine, salvation, as has already been pointed out, will be obtainable by deification rather than by sanctification, and in this natural process conversion will hold an unimportant place, and be regarded as of infrequent occurrence. Theosophy is content with chaotic thoughts, because in general it despises the need of an

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Objective standard by the help of which it may reduce this chaos to a cosmos. And, in the more immediately practical sphere of religion, it does not sufficiently turn its thoughts outwards so that it may grasp the facts of life, including the sin and misery of men. Because in its subjective complacency it does not feel the need of redemption, it does not press onwards to the discovery of the redeemer, as He came to the world of humanity and revealed the loving-kindness of God.

Theosophy lays too much stress on the essential divinity of man, and so does not appreciate sufficiently the distance by which we fall short of the realisation of this divinity. Correspondingly, in connection with our present subject we may say that it is for this reason that it fails to appreciate the uniqueness of the divinity of Christ. It does not see that the main result of an assertion of this uniqueness is not to place Christ in an inaccessible region remote from humanity, but to emphasise the vast difference between the *attainment* which is His, and the *possibilities* of attainment which are all that we can lay claim to at our present stage of development.

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Theosophists attribute an excessive sternness to Christian doctrine because of the stress which the latter lays upon the wrath of God. It views this wrath as if it were a tyrannical expression of anger before which the sinner can only cower and beg for forgiveness. But it forgets that the wrath of God is not arbitrary or tyrannical; it is the counterpart of the constancy of the Divine nature, the implicate of the righteousness of God. And the cry for forgiveness is not forced from a trembling wretch cowering beneath the passionate anger of God; it is rather the outcome of a vivid realisation of the objective righteousness of God, as this is revealed to us through Christ, who tells us also of the love of God. In our anxiety to get away from the conception of a terrible and angry God, we must not lose our hold of the thought that God is righteous, and that this righteousness, being an actuality, cannot deny itself. Theosophy does not altogether escape the danger of a sentimental softness in its conceptions of the Divine. Mr. Charles Gardiner seems to have in mind this danger, as well as allied defects of theosophy which we have been considering, when he says,

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“Theosophy aims at impartiality and tolerance, and while leaving bigotry and persecution far behind, its virtues have been its bane. Impartiality paralyses, and tolerance easily becomes inertia. Theosophy has not yet understood the wrath of the Lamb. Its sweetness needs redemption.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet we must not forget its “sweetness”—or, in more prosaic language, the elements of value which it can contribute to a fuller understanding of Christianity and even to a more practical application of its principles. If theosophy has erred in being too subjective, Christianity has frequently been too objective. For mystical union with Christ it has substituted somewhat meticulous imitation of an external model. It has left Christ far away back in the past ages of the world’s history instead of bringing Him into the present. It has occupied itself too exclusively with the bare facts of His human life and considered them in their detailed particularity; it has not grouped them together and caught often enough a glimpse of their total meaning, glowing with the light of the revelation of the

<sup>1</sup> *Vision and Vesture*, p. 173.

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wisdom and love of God. Just as to treat Christ mystically does not mean to treat Him unhistorically, so to treat Him historically does not mean that we may leave the mystical element altogether out of account. Without doubt we require to start from the historic Jesus, but we must go far beyond our starting point—further than admiration of a commanding personality of the past, further even than value-judgments to which we refuse to give metaphysical foundation—until we attain to the recognition of a present Reality, a Risen Christ. The ideal is the union of a spirit of reverence for history with a consciousness of a present and operative spiritual reality, and towards the realisation of this ideal theosophy may greatly assist us.

Theosophy challenges Christianity to greater liberality and sympathy than have sometimes been shown by Christian preachers and apologists. In its study of Comparative Religion and its investigation of the valuable elements in other religions, theosophy has, as one writer well puts it, done in a wrong way what the Church ought to have done in a better way, and perhaps it is better to do a good thing

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in a mistaken way than not to do it at all. Moreover, theosophy has certainly encouraged the exercise of the intellect in religion and urged us to share in the "glory of the lighted mind"—within limitations which we have already considered. While aware on the one hand of the mistakes which theosophy has made in not carrying its scientific procedure far enough and in relapsing into dogmatism, emotionalism and even magic, through its failure to find adequate philosophical basis for its constructions, we may, indeed, feel on the other hand that theosophy has treated the religious consciousness too much as if it were a matter of the development of special powers of an intellectual character. But though we, as Christians, are unwilling to put knowledge in the supreme place in the religious consciousness, have we sufficiently avoided all encouragement of the suspicion that Christianity despises knowledge? While not putting knowledge in the first place, have we been careful to give it a good second place? Have we not run, even more quickly sometimes than theosophy has done, into the dangers of emotionalism and obscurantism? Have we not been too hesitating in our attacks

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upon narrow dogmatism, too patient of the shackles of a mechanical theory of verbal inspiration and of other artificial and unnecessary adjuncts of the Christian faith ? We have referred our difficulties too simply and directly to the will of God without applying our God-given minds for the understanding of that will, and so we have represented God as the source of arbitrary decrees. Whilst rejoicing in the freedom of a spiritual religion, we have treated it mechanically and rigidly.

Our very sense of the overwhelming reality of our religious basis has sometimes militated against our intelligent appreciation of it. The death of Christ is central, objective and actual in our faith in such a way that the surrounding regions of experience lose their significance. We express our sense of the vital importance of the objective fact by regarding it as a transaction carried through once and for all, something beyond which we cannot go and do not need to go. But surely we would express in a fuller way our sense of its value if we could regard it as a fact of such infinite meaning and influence that the understanding and appreciation of its effects may well occupy

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centuries of the experience of the race and all the years of the life of the individual. Surely we are not compelled to deny opportunities of unlimited advance. Correspondingly, the related experience in the individual religious consciousness, the experience of conversion, need not be treated as a crisis which occurs but once in a life-time and beyond which no progress is called for. Rather it is a new birth which is but the first stage in a new life of which constant expression, intellectual and otherwise, is the predominant characteristic. President A. C. McGiffert has some wise words on the dangers to which we have just been alluding. "The significance of the evangelical revival is that it confined attention largely to the experience of the new birth. To save men by bringing them to Christ was its great concern. Like the old-fashioned novels which always ended with the marriage of hero and heroine, the old evangelicalism stopped with conversion. What followed seemed of minor importance or a matter so simple and self-evident as to require no special thought. Moreover her absorption in winning men for Christ left the Church little time and strength



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to guide those already won. . . . If evangelicalism's radical simplification of Christianity had proved permanently satisfactory this transformation would have perhaps mattered little. But unfortunately the simplification was exclusive, not inclusive, and from the beginning left out of sight vast areas of thought and life which have steadily widened with the growth of humanism and humanitarianism during recent generations."<sup>1</sup>

While not weakening in the least her emphasis upon the importance of evangelisation, Christianity may well be stimulated by theosophy towards greater efforts to recapture those vast areas of thought and life to which President McGiffert refers. We have not valued or even explored sufficiently the treasures of wisdom which are laid up for us in Christ, and, though clearness is not always possible, we have been content with vagueness in our Christian thought even when clearness was attainable, and we have forgotten that it is better to speak five words with understanding than a thousand words in an unknown tongue. There is also laid upon us the duty of being more

<sup>1</sup> Article on "A Teaching Church," *Hibbert Journal*, Oct., 1920.

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assiduous in the cultivation of our religious faculty, not as a collection of occult powers, but as a gift of God to be used for the enlightenment of ourselves and others. The boldness of the theosophical conceptions of progress, grotesque though some of the details of their descriptions may be, may make us more alive to the possibilities of spiritual attainment so that each day of our religious history may be an advance on that which has gone before, and we may constantly strive onwards to a future of fuller understanding whether in this life or in that which is to come.

The stress which theosophists lay upon the value of imagination in the service of religion, especially in connection with their emphasis upon the intimate union of the spiritual and the natural, may also be of the greatest service to us. Theosophists may have used imagination to the detriment of accuracy and sober judgment. They may have allowed imagination to run riot and they may have lived altogether in a world of symbols which they have far too hurriedly taken to be realities. They may have attained only to a diffused sense of the spiritual and discovered it in the particulars

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of the world instead of in the purposefulness and essential beauty of life as a whole. But these exaggerations should not prevent us from asking whether we have not failed to bring into our religion a sense of poetry and of beauty, and whether we have not been too materialistic and prosaic in our religious conceptions and practices. Theosophists have revolted against materialism; have we provided a refuge from it? As the Lambeth Encyclical puts it: "It is the part of the Church to afford such a refuge, and if it fails to do so, there is something wrong with its own life." Is it not the case that in our zeal for simplicity and purity, we have been content to dwell complacently in the midst of crudeness and ugliness?

Have we welcomed as fully as we might have done the conception of the intimate union of the spiritual and the natural? If we have not, we have failed to appreciate the fundamental truth of our religion—the incarnation of Jesus Christ—for this is the greatest testimony that has been given to the world of such an intimate union. And yet we have left this great truth on one side; recent advances in the knowledge of the relation of mind and body have passed us

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by, and those who crave for practical application of such knowledge have found their satisfaction outside the bounds of organised Christianity. But if we are loyal to our faith, the central privilege of our faith should not be neglected by us, and there is justification for the further remarks of the Encyclical already quoted from: "Church people . . . ought to display an intenser faith in our Lord Himself as the source of all healing, bodily and spiritual, and to have bolder expectations of His willingness to respond to their prayers with gracious revelations of His powers. They ought to offer far more numerous examples of that repose upon God which is the health of the soul, and secures in ways which pass understanding the health of the body. For all these things are the rightful heritage of those who abide in the Divine fellowship."

Theosophists may have been too bold in their use of imagination, but we have not been bold enough, and it is our timidity which has often prevented us from entering into the riches of our spiritual inheritance in Christ. We have been afraid of extravagance, and, because we have been rightly reluctant to make

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too much of the ecstatic life, we have made too little of the unitive life in ourselves and have failed to realise the complete expression of it in Christ. Because imagination may be wrongly used, it does not follow that we may not use it also rightly for the construction of a world in which the principle of Christ—the intimate union of the natural and the spiritual—may find expression. We are too much afraid of finding personality in the world, and it remains for us cold and dead. And the unseen world seems far away, perhaps an appropriate sphere of future incarnations, but of little moment to us now. Yet if we believe in our religion, it will bring the unseen out of the indeterminate future into the living concrete present. The incarnation of Christ is the assurance of this, and he who is in Christ is a “new creature” moving about in worlds invisible to the senses, but real to the spirit. The unseen world will no longer be left alone by us, untouched by our thought or imagination, deserted and empty because we are afraid of filling it wrongly. Our religion will not leave us in loneliness. As Mr. Clutton Brock says, “it is the aim of religion to free us from loneliness, to make

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us aware of a universe in which there are not merely things and processes and functions, but everywhere persons answering to ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> But if we are no longer afraid of filling the universe with the personal, we shall not fail to discover the help of the angels and of the spirits of just men made perfect. Our belief in the ministry of angels and the communion of saints will become full of meaning, and the messengers of the Christ-revelation will lead us into the presence of God.

Theosophy challenges us to make the most of our religious inheritance, to cease from our neglect of mysticism and to endeavour to enter into the experience of the saints so that along with them we may feel that the whole world is alive with God and may rejoice at the heart of our religion. Theosophy may stimulate us to wonder which we can transmute into reverence and trust in a God who does not remain indifferent to us or tyrannise over us, but, as our Father, accepts our desire for constant fellowship. In the midst of the confusions of our modern life we shall find the peace which is eternal and learn to interpret the

<sup>1</sup> Essay in Vol. on *The Spirit*, p. 290.

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silence of God. At the bidding of the words of Clement of Alexandria, "we shall cast ourselves into the greatness of Christ, and thence go forward." And, being enfolded in the movement of the Divine life, and having attained to a faith which is not dogma but desire, we shall be carried onwards by the current until we reach the open sea of the full knowledge of God. And for the reason that the world is God's and the spiritual ruleth over the natural, the end which cometh to all men, even death itself, will not be simply an abrupt dissolution of our mortal life or an irremovable cause of separation from our friends, but an entry into a higher state of being, in which, in the company of those whom we love, we shall move onwards and upwards towards the closest communion with the Divine. If Christianity will respond to the challenge of theosophy, it will realise more fully the glory of the inheritance of the Gospel; and theosophists themselves, if only they will try with open minds to understand what Christianity really is, will find in it the goal of all their searching. They have been repelled by narrow views of Christ. A fuller knowledge

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of Him, to the attainment of which their own teaching may contribute not a little, will bring them back again to find in Him the essential meaning and beauty of the world, and the completest satisfaction of the human soul—in Him who is the great Initiator into the illimitable “wisdom of God.” “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. ii. 9.





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